

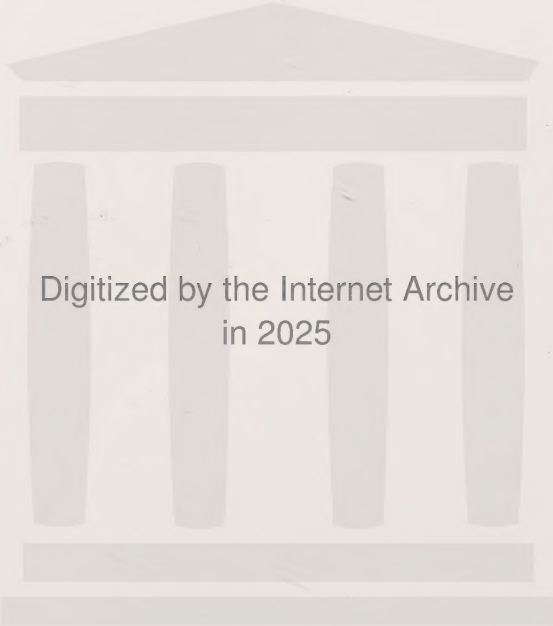


# More THAI WAYS

DENIS SEGALLER







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# **More THAI WAYS**

DENIS SEGALLER

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# INTRODUCTION

Many Thai traditions and customs are very different from those of other countries, especially of the West — a fact which makes them of great interest to non-Thais, and to Westerners in particular. Yet often enough, if one digs a bit deeper, it can be seen that the differences aren't as great as they appear on the surface; all of us, non-Thais and Thais alike, are very much the same human beings under the skin.

This book forms a sequel to "THAI WAYS," and like the first book it is a collection of articles originally printed under the same title as a regular weekly column in the **Bangkok World**. It aims to give the non-Thai reader some insight into the delightful people of Thailand, how they live, and how they react to life's varied situations — as seen through the eyes of an Englishman.

This book is dedicated to my wife Laddawan, without whom a great deal of the material in it would never have been written; to that delightful and highly knowledgeable expert and friend, Mom Rachawongse Ayumongkol Sonakul, always ready to give helpful and correct answers to my questions, who also carefully checked those sections of the book where accuracy is important and I might have slipped up; and to the many other Thai friends who have told me things about Thailand which I didn't know before, and have helped with translating from Thai.

My sincere thanks also go to the **Bangkok World**, for printing the articles in the first place; to Allied Newspapers Limited for publishing this book, and especially to Michael Gorman, David Thomas and Kalayanee Kanchanadul for their initiative, encouragement and help; to Miss Vimolphon Peetathawatchai for kindly allowing me to adapt the section on cloth weaving in Northeast Thailand from her book "Esarn Cloth Design;" and finally, to members of the foreign

community in Bangkok and elsewhere in Thailand — and especially the American Women's Club of Thailand — for their continuing support and appreciation of "Thai Ways," both in the **Bangkok World** every Monday and in my first book, "THAI WAYS," which still seems to be popular and which gives perhaps rather more basic information than the present book.

My thanks are also due to Thai Airways International for permission to adapt certain sections in this book which originally appeared in their inflight magazine, "Sawasdee", before being printed in the **Bangkok World**.

The weekly "Thai Ways" column has been running continuously in the **Bangkok World** since August 1975, and as with the first book, when going through the printed articles to compile this book I found it difficult to be selective, objective, and logical about its presentation in book form. The divisions between ceremonies, customs and beliefs are bound to be blurred, and details in different sections of the book sometimes overlap. Many of these repetitions have been deliberately retained from the original articles. Not only do they help to make each section more or less complete in itself; perhaps, too, they will help to convey a feeling of the intricate network of customs and ideas that make up the life and culture of Thailand.

Most of the original articles in this book were written before King Rama I received the title "The Great" during the Rattanakosin Bicentennial in 1982.

### **A note about the spelling of Thai words in this book**

The Thai language has its own beautiful, decorative and historically rich script which carries overtones of the ancient Sanskrit, Pali, Mon and Khmer languages. The spelling of all Thai words in **Thai script** is precise and logical. However, when "transliterated" or "Romanised" into the Western "ABC" alphabet, there are in practice no hard and fast rules (although Thailand's Royal Institute has laid down an official system showing which Thai letters correspond to which Western ones.) This imprecision in practice can be illustrated by a little anecdote.



Soon after I first arrived in Thailand, I was talking on the phone with a Thai friend, who said “You must contact Mr. X” (telling me a Thai name.) “How do you spell that?” I asked. “Well,” he answered, “let’s see; **how would you like to spell it?**”

In fact the same Thai name is often spelt in a variety of ways in the Western alphabet, as it mentioned elsewhere in this book. It’s all rather arbitrary and a matter of personal choice. In this book I’ve followed my own system of spelling Thai words, which approximates most closely to the sounds I think I hear, with a few universally recognised exceptions. I’ve indicated this system (which I freely admit to not using entirely consistently) in a table in Chapter Four.

Denis Segaller  
Bangkok, April 1982.



**CHAPTER ONE**  
**ROYALTY AND NOBILITY**





## Founder of a Dynasty

1982 — the Bicentennial of the great Chakri Dynasty, a good time to take a look at the story of its Founder.

An English historian once wrote: “We see the Siamese humbled to the dust again and again by a more powerful neighbour, yet always rising up and regaining their freedom... Those who believe in the survival of the fittest will admit that they must possess some special qualities....”

And an old Thai saying holds that “Ayutthaya (that is, the Thai nation) never lacks good men.”

Three such brilliant leaders rose up and together rallied the nation after the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767. The fortunes of all three were to be inextricably linked by fate in the years that followed.

The eldest of the three, Sin, was to rise to the highest ranks of the nobility and as an army general was to gather the scattered Thai forces together to repel the Burmese and so become king of Thailand less than a year after the sacking of Ayutthaya.

The other two were brothers named Thong Duang and Boonma, sons of a high-ranking official in the reign of one of Ayutthaya's last kings.

As General Chakri, Thong Duang was also eventually to become king of Thailand and founder of its present Chakri Dynasty; his younger brother Boonma was to become his “second-in-command” or Deputy King.

When only six years old, Thong Duang had been sent to the Royal Court at Ayutthaya, where he became a page.

Sin, two years older than Thong Duang, was also a page at this time, and the two boys had become close friends. They were both ordained as young novices at the same temple in Ayutthaya at the ages of 11 and 13, and later, after reaching manhood, Thong Duang was ordained again, this time as a full monk.

After leaving the monkhood during the reign of Ayutthaya's last king, Thong Duang was assigned to serve under the Governor of Ratchaburi. Here he married a lady named Nak from a wealthy family. Thong Duang's duties, like those of all government servants in those days, were both military and civil combined.

Serving in Ratchaburi, Thong Duang was therefore not in Ayutthaya at the time of its fall. Neither was his younger brother Boonma, who by now had also risen in rank.

Sin had meanwhile become Phya Tak, the Governor of Tak Province in the North, and was therefore now known as General Taksin. He was mustering an army in the thriving seaport town of Chanthaburi.

Boonma sailed to join him, and so did Thong Duang — for all three men shared a deep love for their country, and a fierce desire to free it from the invading Burmese. General Taksin elevated both brothers in rank, with appointments roughly equivalent to those of senior police officials today.

Over the next 15 years, Thong Duang took part in 11 major campaigns which were ultimately decisive in liberating Thailand from the Burmese threat.

Within a year of Ayutthaya's fall, King Taksin, as he had now become, had recaptured it, although it was then little more than an empty shell of the magnificent city it had once been.

Taksin had established his new capital at Thon Buri, on the west bank of the Chao Phya River.

Three years later he again elevated Thong Duang to the rank of Chao Phya Chakri (the whole title, including "Chakri," had long held the meaning of "commander-in-chief"). Boonma was also given a high-ranking title, Chao Phya Surasih.

During the first seven years of his reign King Taksin himself led all the campaigns against the Burmese, invari-

ably accompanied by his two trusted and brilliantly capable generals, Chakri and Surasih. But later on Taksin remained in his capital to govern the country, and from then on General Chakri had independent command of all the fighting, with his brother as second-in-command.

In the remaining years of Taksin's reign General Chakri succeeded in subduing not only the Burmese, but also the then principalities of Chiang Mai, Luang Prabang and Vientiane, which became King Taksin's vassals.

At one stage in this period the Thai and Burmese armies met on horseback during a temporary truce. The aging Burmese general, Maha Thihathura, praised the 40-year-old Chakri's generalship and prophesied — correctly — that Chakri would one day become King.

Later, General Chakri brought the priceless Emerald Buddha image from Vientiane to Thon Buri. This carved nephrite image is believed to have taken over a thousand years to travel from northern India via Sri Lanka to Laos and Thailand. It now resides permanently in Wat Phra Kaeo, the Temple of the Emerald Buddha.

While he was on a campaign in Cambodia in 1781, news reached General Chakri that there had been a revolt in Thon Buri and King Taksin had been deposed. The General and his brother immediately hurried back to Thon Buri as fast as their elephants and men could march, and on his return to the capital the entire Thai Army and all the Officers of State offered him the throne.

General Chakri accepted, thus founding the present House of Chakri. The date was April 6, 1782 and he was then 45. April 6 is still celebrated every year as Chakri Day and is a public holiday.

The official proclamation of the new King and his first coronation took place in June the same year; it was followed by a more official coronation in much grander style some three years later.

The new King immediately set about building a brand new capital.

Aware that Thon Buri on the west bank of the Chao Phya River was always potentially threatened by further Burmese attacks — and he felt certain there would be more — he

chose the site of the flourishing little trading centre of Bangkok on the east side. (Its original name had been “Bang Makok” — “village of wild olives”).

King Rama I saw that the mighty Chao Phya River would act as the best possible defence against attacks from Burma. Moreover, at this point there was a wide bend in the river, enclosing a large area of land easily defended by digging canals on the east, north and south and thus ideally suited for the new capital.

A rich Chinese merchant occupied the area chosen for the Royal Palace which would become the administrative centre of the city, and he was asked to move to an uninhabited area beyond the new city's confines, which grew into a flourishing Chinese community. Today, 200 years later, this area is known as Sampeng and is the centre of Bangkok's Chinatown.

Before the building of the Royal Palace and its accompanying structures began, an important and historic ceremony took place. This was the fixing in the ground of the “Lak Muang” or City Pillar, a huge 15-foot laburnum log representing something like the foundation stone of the new city. This is believed to house the guardian spirit of the city, who takes care of all its inhabitants.

The construction of all the new place buildings, including the Throne Hall and the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, went ahead with all speed. King Rama I designed the layout of all the great halls, places of worship and other rooms to correspond as closely as possible to the old Royal Palace in Ayutthaya, for he was determined to preserve Thailand's ancient heritage to the utmost. Bricks were brought from Ayutthaya and even dismantled from Thon Buri for further building, especially of fortifications.

King Rama I then gave the capital its new name: “City of Angels, great city of immortals, magnificent jewelled city of the God Indra, seat of the King of Ayutthaya, city of gleaming temples, city of the King's most excellent Palace and Dominions, home of Vishnu and all the gods.”

In Thai this title is all one word, beginning with “Krung-thepmahanakornamornratanakosin...” Its 152 letters in romanised spelling not surprisingly have earned it a place in



the Guinness Book of Records as the world's longest place-name.

While he was creating the new capital, King Rama I as founder of a new line raised all his children and relatives to royal rank. He appointed his brother, Boonma or Chao Phya Surasih, as Maha Uparaja or Deputy King, and had a special palace built for him known as "the Palace of the Front" or "Wang Na" which is now Bangkok's National Museum.

Many new temples were also built, including Wat Chetuphon or Wat Po (the Temple of the Reclining Buddha) and Wat Suthat which was filled with ancient art treasures including a famous Buddha statue from the old capital of Sukhothai.

The Grand Palace, a full square mile in area, was the centre not only of the capital but of the whole country — a fortress city within a city. Within its walls the King lived and worked with the Royal Secretariat, the Court of Justice, the Ministries and the Treasury, the Artillery and Guards Regiments, the Art Studios and School, and the stables for the royal horses and elephants. Further walls enclosed the "Inside," where the King had his private residence, his gardens, and the residences of his Queens and other wives.

But the Burmese continued to harass Thailand during King Rama I's reign, as he had foreseen. And determined though he was to foster the country's ancient cultural values, he was equally steadfast in his purpose of freeing Thailand once and for all from the ever-present threat of Burmese invasion.

Renewed attacks by Burma began while Bangkok was still being built, and the wars dragged on more or less continuously over the next 17 years. According to another Thai saying, Thailand is shaped like an axe with the sharp end pointing eastward towards Cambodia and Laos; so these countries have never posed a serious threat to Thailand's sovereignty. But Burma to the west is confronted only by the axe's blunt rear end, which is why Burmese attacks have had such a lasting effect on Thailand's history.

Among the legends of stirring deeds at this period, none is more famous in Thailand than the true story of two sisters who saved the southern province of Phuket.

The province's governor had just died when the Burmese marched in, and his widow and her sister themselves rallied the populace. With typical feminine guile they rounded up all the island's womenfolk, making them disguise themselves as male soldiers. Coconut-palm leaves were roasted over fires until they became blackened and curled, looking for all the world like the barrels of guns from a distance. The women "soldiers" brandishing their palm-leaf "guns" were scattered among the real soldiers, to give the invading Burmese the impression that Phuket's army was very much larger than it really was, and positively bristling with armaments.

Finally the two sisters adopted a scorched-earth policy and gathered all the island's population within the town walls in a state of siege. The Burmese had the choice of retreating or starving to death, and wisely chose the former course. The grateful king Rama I ennobled the two sisters, and their statue graces the island of Phuket today.

In all the major wars against the Burmese, the King himself led his troops into battle, with his brother the Deputy King in full support. When Thailand in its turn launched an attack on Tavoy in Burma, this involved crossing a high and unexpectedly steep mountain range. The transport and pack elephants had to haul themselves up the mountainside by coiling their trunks round trees, and the King, then nearly 50, pulled himself up by ropes tied to trees like the rest of his men.

After more battles ranging from the South to Chiang Mai in the North, the Burmese were finally driven off for good in 1802, and friendly relations developed between the two nations in the years that followed.

While personally waging the long and arduous wars against the Burmese, King Rama I displayed the true mark of a brilliant king.

He was able at the same time to govern his people well and justly, codify the old laws dating back to Ayutthaya, revise the Buddhist religious canon, maintain the rich cultural traditions of Thailand's past, and inspire the literature of the Court, which reached one of its highest peaks during his reign.

At his second coronation, in the words of Prince Chula Chakrabongse in his book *Lords of Life*, "...The high officers of state presented him with the royal possessions, such as the great gold coaches, palanquins...the royal palace buildings, the weapons and arms...and finally the rice fields and forests of Siam.

"King Rama I said to them: 'All of these things will you take good care of. Together we will govern the State, together we will defend and prosper the Buddhist religion, and together we will defend the Kingdom'."

As Prince Chula points out, King Rama I's monarchy was a paternal one based on the Ten Virtues of a king according to the ancient law: charity, moral living, support for religion, honesty, compassion, freedom from wrongful ambition and from thoughts of revenge, loving the people as their father, moderation in punishment, and constant care for the people's welfare and happiness.

To achieve these aims meant a threefold revival — moral, legal and cultural.

King Rama I was a devout believer in the Buddhist doctrine, always intent on promoting the purity of Buddhism and the monkhood, and one of his main concerns was the installation of famous and historic Buddha statues in the new temples built in his reign.

He also restored the Shrine of the Buddha's Footprint in Saraburi Province, one of Thailand's most revered places of worship.

After the revision of the Buddhist texts by the council which he set up in the seventh year of his reign, a new edition of the Tripitaka, or Scriptures, was produced, which was later printed in the form of 46 large volumes.

King Rama I also reorganised the old Ayutthaya laws. His attention was drawn to a particular case, an inconsistency in the divorce law. A plaintiff from Nakhon Si Thammarat in the South claimed he should be entitled to his wife's property as she was the guilty party, but the law indicated otherwise. Rama I agreed that the old law was unjust (and perhaps unclear too) and this led him to set up a committee to revise and codify all the laws of the land. In doing so, his aim was to develop a high moral standard among his people,

and especially among his courtiers and officials.

He was also a strong and capable legislator in his own right, and enacted 45 entirely new laws and decrees.

Many traditional and splendid ceremonies were organised during his reign, including the tonsure ceremonies for his young children. He commissioned beautiful and ornate royal golden barges. Several white elephants from the provinces were presented to him amid all the ancient royal pomp necessary on these occasions.

King Rama I was an accomplished poet, and himself converted the Indian epic poem, the Ramayana, into Thai verses known to every schoolchild in the land today as the Ramakien. He had artists paint huge murals of many scenes from this story inside the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. His Court became a centre where literature and the arts flourished — especially classical music and dance. Among the poets at the Court the most famous was Sunthorn Phu, who produced literature which has been compared with that of Shakespeare in its shrewd observation of ordinary people.

The King also commissioned a large and elaborately designed funeral urn of gold, with an inner urn of silver in which his own body would be placed after his death. He was so delighted with it that he kept it in his bedroom, which greatly upset one of his wives. The King is said to have retorted that if he didn't see it from the outside while he was still alive, how would he ever be able to see it?

The country's economy prospered under Rama I's firm guiding hand. There were taxes on gambling, alcohol and fishing, duties on goods taken to the market, and a field tax payable in rice. But by far the biggest source of the nation's revenue was its sea trade with China.

King Rama I had the strength of character and the skill necessary to make quick decisions and to choose good advisers — qualities essential to give his country the impetus to rise again as a sovereign nation from the chaos after the fall of Ayutthaya. And his physical strength was every bit as great; he had a sound and healthy constitution right to the end of his life. He rose early every day and offered food to the monks on their morning alms-round. At

about 10.30 a.m. a group of invited monks would eat their main meal in his presence in the council chamber, after which the King received reports from the Treasury. He then gave his daily audience from the throne to various groups of people. After meeting his family at lunch he took his afternoon rest. Another audience was given in the evening, always opened by a sermon preached by a monk. Generally the audience ended at 9 or 10 p.m., but sometimes it continued far into the night.

King Rama I had 42 children from 29 wives. After a short illness, he died in 1809 at the age of 72. He was one of Thailand's most outstanding rulers, and his ability to weld his people together gave birth to the modern Thai nation.

Eight of his descendants have been Chakri Kings after him, including His present Majesty King Bhumibol. His memory is honoured by a bronze statue at the foot of the Chakri Memorial Bridge in present-day Bangkok; and in April 1982 His Majesty the King officiated at a ceremony to proclaim King Rama I "The Great."

*Much of the material in this section was obtained from Prince Chula Chakrabongse's book "Lords of Life," published by Alvin Redman, London, 1976, and from "The Restoration of Thailand Under Rama 1, 1782-1809", by Klaus Wenk, published by the Association for Asian Studies, University of Arizona Press, Tucson, Arizona, USA, 1968.*

## Chulalongkorn: The Beloved and Great King

Dusk was falling over the plains of Central Siam one evening about 90 years ago. A farmer living beside a klong saw a small group of men who had moored their boat nearby, and were preparing to cook their evening meal on the bank.

One of the men seemed quite ordinary, neither particularly rich nor poor, and the two or three others appeared to be his servants.

With true Thai hospitality, the farmer invited them into his house to share his own meal and spend the night there, and they accepted.

While they were eating they chatted about the affairs of the local village, in which the stranger seemed unusually interested; the farmer hinted at corruption and oppression from some government officials in the area.

"Really?" said the stranger. "Does the King know about this?"

"Oh, no," replied the farmer, "the King knows nothing of it — he never visits these parts; he stays in his palace in Bangkok."

During the conversation the farmer's young son kept on darting quick glances at the stranger, comparing him with a portrait hanging on the wall.

After muttering a few times "Meuan jing-jing!" ("He really does look the same!") the boy suddenly prostrated himself at the stranger's feet.

When he saw this, realisation equally suddenly dawned on the farmer; "Your Majesty!" he whispered, and he too crouched on the floor...

The stranger was indeed none other than King Chulalong-



korn himself; and it was as much for his deep concern for his people's welfare as for all his other great works, that posterity has called him "The Beloved and Great King."

"So you see," said His Majesty to the farmer, smiling but with more than a little concern in his voice, "the King DOES visit these parts — but he does so in order to find out about the very kind of injustices you have mentioned, so please keep quiet about my visit and let me remain incognito; I am just a stranger passing through, but I want to find out if the people are being well or ill treated."

This is one version of a well known story, of which there are several others; but it is certainly based on fact, for King Chulalongkorn often travelled incognito upcountry so as to mingle freely among the people and learn about their grievances and problems.

The scarcity of newspapers and photographs during his Reign (from AD 1868 to 1910) made this easier, and the King usually went unrecognised — except, as in the anecdote above, by an occasional sharp-eyed youngster.

These intimate journeys among his people, and the very obvious compassion for them which caused him to make so many historic changes in the destiny of his nation, enabled them to get to know their King well — to love and revere him as a father.

October 23 is enshrined in the Thai people's hearts. For it was on this date that their beloved King passed away in 1910. As already mentioned, Thais refer to King Chulalongkorn as "Phra Piya Maharaj" — "the Beloved and Great King" — and October 23 is called "Wan Piya Maharaj" or "the Beloved and Great King's Day." Foreigners know it as Chulalongkorn Day, and it is a national holiday.

Two things were the driving forces behind all the work this great King accomplished during his 42-year Reign, the longest so far in Thailand's history: his deep concern for his people's well-being, and for the very survival of his country in a time of swift and uncertain world change.

Not only did he succeed in preserving Siam's independence and put the country squarely on the world map; he completely reorganised its administrative and legal systems, finance and tax collection, education, public health services,



communications — he founded Siam's railway system, and had many major new canals dug...

The King also founded 12 new ministries, established postal and telegraph services, built new temples such as the magnificent Marble Temple, new roads, bridges...

And he abolished slavery forever..

In short, he brought Siam into the 20th Century, continuing the work begun by his illustrious father King Mongkut (Rama IV).

King Chulalongkorn was born in September 1853, the eldest son of King Mongkut and Queen Debsirin. He learned to read and write from the "ladies of the Inside," who also taught him Siam's royal traditions and court etiquette.

His father was determined that he should have an early and thorough grounding in English, for which British and American tutors were hired. As for such sports as horsemanship, his father taught them himself.

Following Royal custom Prince Chulalongkorn underwent his tonsure ceremony when he was 13, presided over by King Mongkut who himself cut off the first three tufts of hair with golden shears.

During the same year the Prince was ordained for a short period as a Buddhist novice.

When King Mongkut died in 1868, Prince Chulalongkorn succeeded him on the throne. But the new King was only 15, so the Chief Minister, Chao Phya Srisuriyawongse, became Regent and governed the country.

During his five-year minority, the young King travelled to Singapore, Java and India to study colonial government and administration. From these visits he gained enormously in knowledge and understanding, and even at that young age he foresaw that many drastic changes were needed for Siam. But he was equally well aware that his country's ancient and deep-rooted traditions could not be changed or swept away all at once.

In 1873, when he was 20 and therefore of age, King Chulalongkorn had his second Coronation and assumed the full task of governing the country.

He immediately set about preparing the groundwork for his reforms, some of which were to take more than 30 years

to complete. "I wish to see whatever is beneficial to the people accomplished gradually according to circumstances, and unjust customs abolished," he said. "But as it is impossible to change everything overnight, steady pruning is necessary..."

He repeatedly stressed that reform must be a GRADUAL process, with first things being tackled first.

"We will administer the country well if we develop opportunities for the people to earn their living so that they are benefited by the Government, for then they will pay the taxes which are the economic foundation of the Government. Therefore an efficient administration and fostering ways of providing for the people's livelihood are the most important and final purpose of the Kingdom."

In 1874, when he was still not yet 22, he took those first steps in reforming the administration and the judiciary — and towards abolishing slavery: He established a Council of State, Siam's first real Cabinet, and a Privy Council.

In his proclamation speech, King Chulalongkorn characteristically explained that the Council's purpose was to bring greater well-being to the people. At the same time, he unexpectedly announced one of his earliest reforms, a highly dramatic and moving one: "His Majesty wishes to remove oppression and lower his status so as to allow officials to sit on chairs, instead of prostrating themselves in his presence."

The King saw that his own Government must have Western methods and ideas as its guidelines. Partly with this in mind he sent four of his sons aged about 10 or 11 to England for their education so that later they could help him carry out his many reforms. He also sent other sons and relatives to Europe later on, for the same purpose.

In his letters to his young sons in England, he wrote: "In sending you abroad to study, my sole purpose is for you to acquire knowledge: therefore, do not boast that you are a prince, but apply all your efforts to your studies, so that you may have a chance to give useful service to your country; for if you think that just because you were born a prince you need do nothing all your life, such an existence would be no different from that of an animal."

As he had foreseen, administrative reform turned out to be a very slow process.

But in due course, his purpose of revising all Siam's laws in order to bring about the people's maximum well-being and happiness was largely achieved.

The whole country was systematically divided into "circles" or "monthon", provinces ("changwad"), districts ("amphoe") and sub-districts ("tambon"). In this way the power of the King was extended downward towards the people, for at the village level the headman or "puyaiban" would be elected by popular vote, while each "tambon" would be headed by a "kamnan", an official to be elected by all the "puyaibans" and answerable to the provincial and ultimately the central Government.

In the country's legal and tax-collecting systems, it was a similar story of gradual but steady and determined progress. King Chulalongkorn inherited an antiquated and unworkable judicial system. For instance, the ancient Law of the Three Seals, which dated back to the 13th-Century Sukhothai Period, involved trial by ordeal. The truth of the plaintiff's or defendant's claims was decided by seeing which of the two could stay longer under water.

Tax collection, too, had become hopelessly confused and corrupt, with the right to become a "tax farmer" or collector going to the highest bidder. The King was determined to change all this into a fair and just system, equal for everyone in the land, and which would protect the individual and his property.

This aim was also the cornerstone of his foreign policy: Siam must transform its legal system into a pattern accepted by the world's great powers, for only then would the country become safe from the threat of foreign annexation.

By 1892 King Chulalongkorn was able to proclaim his new Ministry of Justice with a streamlined organisation for Bangkok's law courts. And by 1908 a firm and centralised judicial structure covering the whole country was achieved — the culmination of 34 years of patient, painstaking legal reform.

Similarly, the tax system was reorganised by establishing a central Revenue Department, which in 1892 became the

Ministry of Finance. (Later in King Chulalongkorn's reign, one of those same four young sons whom he had sent to be educated in England, Prince Kitiyakara — grandfather of Her present Majesty the Queen — was to become Minister of Finance).

Through all these reforms, the rights of every private citizen were guaranteed by law to an extent never before achieved in Siam. The people were protected against the whims of corrupt officials such as those hinted at in the anecdote at the beginning of this section.

And in making the reforms, the King had the benefit of advice from skilled European experts — for he spoke English fluently.

Together with his administrative and legal reforms, there came a gradual improvement in Siam's economy through increased trade and more efficient tax collection. So much so, that the national revenue grew from eight million baht at the beginning of the Reign to 61 million at the end. Over the same period, the country's rice exports multiplied 15-fold.

"All children, from my own to the poorest, should have an equal chance of education." With these words in 1881, the King opened Suan Kularb School, today one of Thailand's biggest and best boys' secondary schools.

By 1892, the King's reform of Siam's education had made it possible to set up the first full Ministry of Education, with a comprehensive and nationwide programme from primary school to top secondary level. The programme, largely adapted from the British system of the time, included the education of women, teacher training, the production of textbooks and many other important features.

In 1897 the King founded a scholarship scheme to enable commoners to study abroad, as his own sons had done.

In 1902 he founded the Royal Pages' School for future government employees, and in the following Reign this developed into Thailand's first (and still most distinguished) university, named in the great King's memory as Chulalongkorn University. Its emblem is the "Phra Keeao," a tiered crown resting on a silk tasselled cushion, the crown being a replica of the six-inch headpiece worn by King Chulalongkorn as a boy to keep his hair tidy.

King Chulalongkorn also instituted a Public Health Department including Siam's first hospital, now Siriraj Hospital, and medical and nursing schools. When the hospital was first opened in 1888, it was difficult to find any patients; for everyone believed that to go to hospital was to die. So it was suggested that some of the city's beggars with skin diseases be taken to the hospital for treatment — but this idea met with an unsuspected snag: The beggars protested indignantly that curing their condition would deprive them of their means of livelihood!

However, it wasn't long before the public's fears evaporated and the hospital became so sought-after that there were not enough beds to go round.

From the very beginning of his Reign, King Chulalongkorn was determined to do away with slavery — but as with all his other reforms, he realised that this could only be done GRADUALLY. He began his measures in this direction as early as 1874, by decreeing that henceforth any child born into slavery would automatically become freed at the age of 21.

A step-by-step approach to the problem of slavery was essential in order to avoid causing suffering either to the nobles and rich men who had long been used to employing slaves, or to the slaves themselves, who were utterly dependent on their masters for food and shelter. "To emancipate them straight away," said the King, "would be to put them in danger of being neglected and left to die by themselves."

More than 30 years later, in 1905, gradual reform had made it possible for a Royal Edict to decree that ALL children of slaves be immediately freed; and complete abolition was finally achieved in the following Reign, less than two years after King Chulalongkorn's death.

All these great and sweeping reforms at home helped to give the King a free hand in his foreign policy and allowed him successfully to walk the tightrope between the colonial aspirations of France and Britain. Although he could not avoid giving up 90,000 square miles of territory to those two imperial powers, he succeeded brilliantly through revised treaties in preserving his country's independence, and so

proved himself a statesman of the highest order. Moreover, this skilful diplomacy vastly enhanced Siam's prestige among the great powers.

Among King Chulalongkorn's most important achievements in the international field were his two visits to Europe, in 1897 and 1907 — the first time any Siamese king had ever been outside Asia. On both trips, he had the gratification of seeing how high his prestige was in the world.

The tours were a huge success, for he was also the first Asian ruler who had ever been able to converse freely and informally in English with British and European royalty. This was because since his earliest childhood English lessons, he had always loved to speak English, and often mixed it with Thai when talking.

These two visits to Europe, and the warmth and cordiality of the King's relations with European heads of state, led to an invaluable understanding between Siam and the West. In France, he was gratified to find he was well received, both officially and spontaneously by the French people.

During his second European visit in 1907, he spent an enjoyable weekend at Windsor Castle as the guest of King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra, at which he met Prince and Princess Andrew of Greece, parents of Britain's present Duke of Edinburgh.

But during both his visits to Europe, his thoughts often flew back home to his own people. In a telegram to Queen Saovabha he said, "I have taken pains to spend my time in a manner which will benefit our beloved land..."

A charming description of his weekend at Windsor Castle was given in his letters to a favourite daughter, Princess Nipha, sent on three consecutive days in June 1907. These were later published in Thai under the title "Klai Ban" ("Far from Home") — but not, unfortunately, translated into English. "Apart from a garden party for 8,500 people and a formal dinner party, it was a friendly weekend..." he wrote.

He very much enjoyed Western food, and in these letters to his daughter he described with relish some of the dishes he had tasted — an omelette, sandwiches, and an enormous and juicy pear. In touching words he described how, while eating the pear, his thoughts suddenly turned to her



and his eyes filled with tears, for he longed to share the delicious fruit with her.

King Chulalongkorn was in fact a connoisseur of good food, whether Thai, Chinese, Malay or European, and he was himself an excellent cook. He even wrote a cookery book containing nearly 200 European recipes including soups, meat, lobster, fish, sandwiches and salads. He particularly enjoyed dining out in Paris, and always made a point of first visiting the kitchen and talking to the chef. Best of all, he loved to cook and eat at picnics.

Besides cooking, he had a great many other hobbies, of which keeping Leghorn hens and photography were his favourites in his later years.

King Chulalongkorn had 77 children from 36 wives. Altogether he had 92 wives, but only four were created "Phra Nang" or Queens — the Princesses Sunanda, Sawang, Saovabha and Sukhumala. Queen Sunanda was created "Somdech Phra Nang" — "Her Majesty" — but drowned tragically in a boating accident before she was 21. The "Somdech" title was also bestowed on Queens Sawang and Saovabha, the latter being later made "Somdech Phra Barom Rachinee Nart" or Supreme Queen.

This great and many-sided king had a wide knowledge of the world — geographically, historically and constitutionally; he was indeed one of Asia's greatest statesmen.

A French historian, writing about King Chulalongkorn's achievements, said "One stands confounded before the grandeur of such work accomplished." And indeed the King was tireless in his efforts for his country, often worked far into the night and seldom retired before three a.m.

His reforms and other achievements in preserving the independence of his nation and ensuring a better life for all of his people, were so many and so sweeping that it is doubtful whether even half of them have been covered.

But it should also be mentioned that in 1904 he created the National Library — just one more of his ceaseless efforts to bring Siam into the modern world.

In 1908 he celebrated 40 years' rule amid wild rejoicing and an unprecedented display of loyalty and love. The public subscribed a large sum of money to erect a memorial to him

— something never before attempted for any Thai, alive or dead. The King agreed to have a modest equestrian statue put up outside his Dusit Palace — the statue where every year, thousands pay homage to his memory. If you want to see a demonstration, straight from the heart, of the Thai people's love and reverence for one of their greatest rulers, go early on October 23, Chulalongkorn Day and a national holiday, to the Royal Plaza.

Here you will see thousands of university students and others prostrating themselves in homage before the equestrian statue of King Chulalongkorn the Great. You'll witness one of Thailand's greatest spontaneous public displays of reverence and affection for a past ruler.

Much of the material for this section was obtained from five books available in the Siam Society and AUA libraries, to the authors of which the present writer would like to express his thanks: "Lords of Life" by HRH the late Prince Chula Chakrabongse; "Chulalongkorn the Great" by Pra-choom Chomchai; "Law and Kingship in Thailand in the Reign of King Chulalongkorn" by David M. Engel; "A History of Thailand" by Rong Syamananda; and "Popular History of Thailand" by M.L. Manich Jumsai.

## When a Royal baby “comes of age”

Many Thai ceremonies are partly Buddhist and partly Brahmin. An example, rich in tradition, was the ancient Royal ceremony held in the Amphorn Hall at Dusit Palace early in 1979. Dating back to the Ayutthaya period, the ceremony solemnises the occasion when a Royal baby reaches the age of one month (sometimes three months) and is officially installed in its cradle.

On this particular occasion the ceremony was held for the Royal Grandchild, the baby daughter of His Royal Highness Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn and His Royal consort Princess Soamsawali.

His Majesty the King had expressed the wish that this ceremony should be held in identical fashion to that which took place when the Crown Prince himself was one month old.

The team of Royal Astrologers had previously calculated the auspicious day and time — between 9.49 and 10.09 a.m. on Thursday, January 11. They also examined the baby Princess' horoscope so that His Majesty could bestow a suitable name for her.

According to Royal custom, the day before the ceremony the holy water to be used was prepared and blessed by 10 monks led by His Holiness the Supreme Patriarch.

Early in the morning on the day of the ceremony, the same 10 monks were offered food at Dusit Palace.

Their Majesties and their two daughters arrived from Chitrlada Palace at 9.15 a.m., and were welcomed by the Crown Prince and Princess Soamsawali and also by the King's sister, Her Royal Highness Princess Galayani Watana, and other members of the Royal Family, government officials and His Holiness the Supreme Patriarch together with other monks.

Everyone proceeded to the ceremonial hall, where His Majesty lit candles and joss-sticks and paid homage before the Chaiyawat Buddha statue.

The Supreme Patriarch and the monks chanted a blessing, and at half-past nine His Majesty poured the holy water into a large bowl. Another high-ranking monk completed the initial part of the ceremony by placing in the bowl fish and prawn cages and coconuts wrapped in gold and silver paper, after which some of the holy water was put into a gourd.

The main ceremony consisted of three basic procedures: Cutting the Royal baby's hair, bestowing her name and placing her in the cradle.

At the auspicious time, the baby Princess was brought to the King by her nurse, Miss Raka Nakachart. His Majesty poured holy water from the conch shell onto his grandchild's forehead and gave her a "bai matoom" or leaf from the Indian bael tree. He then took the Royal Thai Scissors and cut off a few locks of the baby girl's hair. After pouring more holy water from the gourd, His Majesty tied sacred threads round the baby's wrists and anointed her forehead with "paeng krajae" or fragrant white paste. She was then taken away to rest for a while.

The monks started chanting; a Brahmin blew on a conch shell: lords-in-waiting sounded the drums, and the entire orchestration of gongs, conch shells and trumpets began in characteristic Thai Royal tradition.

At the end of the chanting, the nine monks left the hall; the Supreme Patriarch remained behind.

His Holiness now poured holy water to anoint the frame from which the cradle would be suspended, after which the cradle itself was attached.

A sign was hung on the frame, and the mattress was put in the cradle along with various ceremonial objects — a grindstone of the type used in traditional medicine, a winter melon coated with a special kind of chalk, and bags containing grains, beans and sesame seeds. The cradle was then anointed with holy water.

Then the second procedure started in which His Majesty gave the baby Princess her name. The King placed various

traditional Royal regalia symbolically inside the cradle and immediately took them out again: A gold box containing the baby girl's horoscope, silver bullion, a bag of coins, a gold water-bowl overlaid with enamel, a pedestal and gold water-pot together with a gold padlock and key, a sewing box, and the gold name-plate with the Royal Grandchild's name engraved on it — Phra-ong Chao (Her Royal Highness) Bhajara Kitiyabha, which means "Bright with Honour and Virtue that are as Precious as Diamonds." The baby girl was briefly dipped in water in the bowl.

The King then requested the Supreme Patriarch to pour water over the baby Princess' hands, after which came the third main procedure: The Princess was officially placed in the cradle attended by Tao (Lady) Sophanives and the nurse. The Chief Brahmin now rocked the cradle while two Brahmin attendants sang a lullaby. Other Brahmins struck up the traditional Thai music again on the conch shells, trumpets and drums.

A red cloth was laid down round the ceremonial area and the Brahmin officials formed a circle to perform a "wian-tien" in celebration, in which candles were passed from hand to hand, each official wafting the smoke towards the Royal baby in the cradle to bring her good fortune. The "bai-sri", auspicious cooked rice ornately wrapped in banana leaves, was placed near the cradle, and after a further anointing, threads of nine different colours were placed across the Royal Grandchild's feet. Her Royal Highness Princess Galayani Wattana also anointed the baby Princess' hands and presented gifts.

The Prime Minister presented the Crown Prince with the Princess' birth certificate, after which other members of the Royal family and high-ranking officials presented Princess Soamsawali with gifts for the Royal baby.

His Majesty paid final homage in front of the Buddha statue. And so the rich, ancient and colourful Royal occasion came to an end.

## The “Chula” graduation ceremony: a ballet without music

Every year His Majesty the King presides over Chulalongkorn University's annual graduation ceremony. Reading about it brings back memories of this beautiful, moving and impressive ceremony full of pageantry and dignity, which I once attended in 1966.

On that occasion I was working at “Chula”, and a physics lecturer invited me to witness the ceremony. He warned me that once we were in our seats in the auditorium we would have to remain there for three hours. And it was an experience I'll never forget.

In 1981 His Majesty conferred degrees on more than 3,800 people and the ceremony was, as is usual these days, spread over three separate days. I'll try to describe it.

During the two weeks before the ceremony every new graduate-to-be is drilled in rigorous rehearsals until everyone knows his or her routine perfectly, on stage as well as off. Two days before the ceremony begins there's a series of mass rehearsals in the auditorium.

On each of the three graduation days, the students put on the shimmering translucent white-and-gold robes, each one trimmed with the colour of the respective Faculty. Beneath their gowns the men wear white shirt and trousers of the “rachapataen” or “Royal Pattern” uniform.

The mornings are taken up with much lighthearted photograph-taking. Every new graduate-to-be gathers with his or her family for group photos in “Chula's” large grounds.

Shortly after one p.m. a dozen or so Royal Household Guards in spiked helmets line up in front of the auditorium entrance. The 3,000-seat auditorium fills up as members of



the academic staff and thousands of new graduates take their places. No student's parents are allowed inside. Chairs are set up outside under awnings facing a battery of closed-circuit television receivers which relay the proceedings to perhaps another 2,000 people. Many of these are poor; some have made long, tiring journeys from every corner of the Kingdom to capture, on television, that magic moment when the child for whose education they have scraped and sacrificed for years becomes a graduate of the country's oldest and most respected university.

Towards the appointed time, a hush falls on the crowd outside. Then suddenly a murmur ripples through them — "He's coming."

His Majesty steps out of the Royal car. After a brief moment's pause he ascends the auditorium steps, protected by a huge blue umbrella and preceded by Palace retainers in traditional headgear.

At the top of the steps His Majesty walks along a carpet strewn with rose petals by kneeling girl students. He is welcomed by the University authorities and goes inside and onto the stage.

Immediately and dramatically, the Royal Anthem strikes up. Some 5,000 loyal subjects, inside and out, stand to attention. His Majesty lights candles at the altar near which are seated a row of monks beside the Buddha statue. It is a moment charged with emotion. The air is alive with the people's deep love and respect for His Majesty.

The King then takes his seat on the stage where he will remain for the next three hours.

After a brief speech of welcome by the Rector, the Dean of the first Faculty of the day takes his place at the rostrum on the left of the stage. He starts calling out the graduates' names in alphabetical order. The first 30 or so of these are already standing lined up at the left-hand side, ready to go on stage.

From now on, the ceremony is like a ballet without music. There are eight students on stage at any one time, including the two standing on the steps of the left and right-hand sides. The students form a line stretching across the stage from left to right; the one in the centre walks towards His

Majesty as his name is called out. He bows, and all the other students on stage bow in unison; the girls curtsy. The King hands the student his or her blue-bound certificate. Then everyone moves one place forward. The three who have passed His Majesty walk backwards so as to remain facing him, and bow or curtsy again; the last student turns and walks off stage while those who have passed His Majesty again bow or curtsy in unison. A new student has meanwhile come on stage from the left.

The continuous procedure follows a measured rhythm. It's almost as if the "ballet" is "conducted" by the Dean's regular announcement of each student's name — as indeed it is. The pattern formed by the students on the stage never varies: bow or curtsy — move on one place — bow or curtsy again. It makes a wonderful sight, with the students' glittering robes picked out by spotlights.

Fresh batches of students rise from their seats, a whole row at a time, as their turn draws near. They too bow or curtsy in unison with those on the stage, then make their way to the left-hand side of the hall in readiness for the great moment.

Students who have left the stage and are returning to their seats bow or curtsy singly, but still in rhythm with the rest, before entering their row of seats.

And so the great ceremony goes on, hour after hour. The steady, regular beat never changes, pausing only for brief bursts of clapping and for one Faculty and Dean to give place to the next.

A never-to-be-forgotten event for students, parents and onlookers alike — including this writer.

## The House at the End of the Slope

April 28 is the anniversary of the birthday of His Royal Highness Prince Narisranuwativongse. Prince Naris, as he is usually known, was the half-brother of King Chulalongkorn, and the son of King Mongkut (King Rama IV, who reigned from 1851 to 1868) and Princess Bannarai. The Prince was born on April 28, 1863 and died at the age of 83 on March 10, 1946, the last surviving son of King Mongkut.

The Prince's descendants organise a "Naris Day" ceremony every year on April 28 at "Baan Plai Nern," his summer residence at No. 1160, Rama IV Road, Klong Toey.

The entrance to the grounds is a short distance down a driveway on the south side of Rama IV Road. Travelling in the direction away from the city centre, this driveway is on the right-hand side of the street, barely 50 yards past the railway crossing and the overpass bridge carrying the Din Daeng-Tha Rua Expressway.

The name "Baan Plai Nern" — "the house at the end of the slope" — dates from the days when Prince Naris and his family used to travel to and from his summer residence in a horse-drawn carriage, which could not negotiate the then steep slope leading up to the railway tracks (Rama IV Road was quite a bit lower than it is today) and down again to the house, unless the driver got out and pushed! Even then, the horses had to recover their breath before proceeding over the bridge across the klong or canal to the Prince's house.

The group of three beautiful old Thai-style houses, some of which date from the reign of King Rama III, are in a most charmingly rural setting in a large and very lovely private garden surrounded by beautiful trees.

Prince Naris was a great patron and discerning connoisseur of all the arts, and was at one time in charge of the

Department of Performing Arts. He designed the Marble Temple and the murals in the main chapel of Wat Rachathiwat. He also saved many art treasures that had been neglected and preserved them at Wang Tha Phra, his former official residence (now the Faculty of Interior Design of Silpakorn University).

The works of art that he protected so lovingly were later transferred to Baan Plai Nern, and are on display to visitors every year on Naris Day.

The Prince was also a composer of music and drama, and several of his literary works are considered masterpieces of Thai literature, such as his rewritten version of the very ancient (pre-Buddhist-era) story from Sanskrit literature called "Anirudh" or "Unaruth" in Thai. The Baan Plai Nern amateur traditional ballet group performed this play on Naris Day in 1981. Here's a brief synopsis of Prince Naris' version of "Unaruth."

Unaruth, whose royal grandfather was a reincarnation of Phra Narai (the Hindu god Vishnu) went hunting one day with his courtiers and had to stay overnight in the jungle. Before going to sleep, the courtiers paid homage to Phra Sai, the spirit of the banyan tree. The spirit was so pleased that he took the sleeping Unaruth to the bedchamber of Princess Usa, daughter of the king of Krung Phan.

Foreseeing that there would be trouble due to the enmity existing between the two royal families, the banyan tree spirit cast a spell over Unaruth and Usa so that they were both struck dumb. But even though they could not speak, it was love at first sight between them.

Before dawn, the spirit carried Unaruth, still asleep, back to the banyan tree and his courtiers.

When each of them woke up in the morning and failed to see the other, they were in despair. However, Usa had a very talented governess named Supalak, who volunteered to sketch the portrait of any young god, prince or king likely to have been the nocturnal visitor. (This episode gives the Thai choreographers the chance to devise the most intricate movements as Supalak travels in search of her mistress' "Prince Charming." She sees devas (angels) dancing, and mingles with them to observe closely any male likely to be

the cause of her mistress' despair).

The 1981 performance ended with Supalak presenting her sketches to Princess Usa. But in the original story, there was no sketch of Unaruth, so Usa wept bitterly. Supalak therefore took Usa's "sabai" or shoulder-scarf to Unaruth, who recognised Usa's scent on it and immediately went back with Supalak to his beloved, to the great joy of both the lovers.

But this is still not the end of the story, for Princess Usa's father, learning of the unauthorised union, became angry. Unaruth was tied with a "naga" or magical snake, and suffered shame and torture until his royal grandfather came to his rescue. Battles followed, and Unaruth became conqueror of both realms — and several other ladies' hearts.

A granddaughter of Prince Naris kindly took me to see part of a semi-dress rehearsal in the beautiful Baan Plai Nern grounds. To the tinkling taped music of a "ranad" or classical Thai xylophone (a full-scale Thai "piphat" band provided music on the day) some 30 young girls of school age in bright red "panungs" with the ends rolled together and tucked between the legs in classical Thai fashion, danced on the lawn to the hand-clapping rhythm of their teachers and choreographers.

And now, some more details about the house itself. Although I said Baan Plai Nern is THREE houses, it's really only ONE house — but it looks like TWO houses! This is because the old, steep-roofed Thai-style wooden houses were built so that they could be completely dismantled, panel by panel and wall by wall. They could then be transported in their "CKD" or "completely knocked-down" state (to borrow an expression from modern technology in the furniture and other trades) and re-erected in a different village, town or city. This was possible because no nails were used in their construction — only wooden pegs which could be hammered out and later hammered back in again.

In the case of "Baan Plai Nern," His Royal Highness bought several such houses. They could be acquired quite cheaply at that time, about 70 years ago, because they were considered old-fashioned; people preferred the then latest

new-fangled bungalows with corrugated-iron roofs.

Today these old-style houses are quite rare and seem to have come back into favour again; they can fetch high prices — if you're lucky enough to find one in good condition in a country town or village! Baan Plai Nern is actually made of the very rare “golden teak.”

The Prince arranged the houses so that they were interconnected by raised balconies at first-floor level (second-floor, in American parlance) as was usually done with these old-style Thai houses.

He lived there for 30 years, making modifications to the complex by roofing the connecting balconies over and walling them in. Thus the three houses became in effect one house. But as seen from Rama IV Road, there are still two separate gabled roofs, so the impression from outside is of TWO houses!

I have chosen some excerpts from the book “Baan Plai Nern” by the Prince's daughter, Mom Chao Duangchitr Chitrabongse, which a friend has kindly translated into English and which provide interesting insights into the Princess' life there as a child.

Although originally Prince Naris lived at Wang Tha Phra, a palace opposite the northwest gate of the Royal (Grand) Palace, he suffered from bronchitis and found that the fresh, breezy atmosphere in the Klong Toey area was much better for his health. (“Klong Toey,” by the way, means Screwpine Canal, and was originally so called because of the many screwpine trees along the canal's banks). So after buying 7,200 square metres of paddy field and re-erecting the group of Thai houses on that land, he took up residence there in 1912.

At that time Klong Toey was an open, mainly uninhabited area of paddy fields and market gardens. The local people traded by boat along canals running parallel with Rama IV Road.

At the Sala Daeng area (so called on account of a small red-painted hut belonging to the Paknam Railway Company opposite Chulalongkorn Hospital), Rama IV Road consisted of two rows of bricks just wide enough for wheels of vehicles which were mostly horse-drawn carts or carriages. Sugar-



palms lined the whole length of the road.

There was also the railway owned by the Paknam Railway Company, which ran between Hua Lampong (Paknam Railway) Station opposite the present Hua Lampong Station, and Paknam (Samut Prakan).

"People living in our area would get on the train at Klong Toey Station and get off at Hua Lampong," writes M.C. Duangchitr. "Most convenient of all was to take the electric tram which was occasionally allowed to run on the railway line between Hua Lampong and Klong Toey when no train was in the offing..."

"Whenever a train approached, there would be a warning hum all along the line, and the tram had to take refuge by shunting onto the nearest siding..."

"The tram service had triangular red-painted metal plates nailed on posts to indicate the tram stops. When His Royal Highness had settled down permanently at Baan Plai Nern, one of these plates was fixed on the electricity pole in front of his residence.

"Moreover, the drivers and inspectors obliged us by fetching or taking things between Hua Lampong and the residence, and even volunteered to do some shopping for us..."

"People from Wang Tha Phra would send a wooden dispatch-box with documents to His Royal Highness through the courtesy of the tram stationmaster, and the tram staff would take them back again after His Royal Highness had dealt with them. This kind gesture saved us a lot of time.

"In those days household electric supply was available, but there was as yet no public tap-water at Klong Toey. So we had to keep rows of "klong-jars" to store water for our use.

"When we ran out of water, we had to send people in boats to fetch it from the public utility supply at Sala Daeng. But in those days the water in the canal was quite clean; if it became cloudy, we could make it clear by adding aluminium sulphate.....

"In order not to indulge in great expense, His Royal Highness only had the land on which the houses were built filled in. The rest was left as paddy fields, though some was

elevated for a kitchen-garden in which we grew our own chillies, vegetables, bananas and so on.

“Gradually, the plot was filled in to make a lawn and grow flowers. There were no hedges, just trees to mark the boundaries.

“The person who had sold the first plot to His Royal Highness proposed selling the adjoining field at 2.50 baht a square wah (four square metres), and some other land at only one baht. His Royal Highness eventually owned 10 rai of paddy field, which he rented to farmers. We went to help in the field at planting and harvesting time, and thoroughly enjoyed it.

“At first the houses were roofed with thatch. Some, like the main pavilion, had wooden frame walls which could be tilted out. Once all the panels were tilted, it really was open and there were only balustrades around. But during the rainy season, this arrangement proved inconvenient; the panels were difficult to close in stormy weather. Sometimes if they were not closed quickly enough, the wind would catch them and blow them away onto the lawn — in one case carrying off the servant who was closing them as well. Finally His Royal Highness had to install fixed wooden walls with wide, new-style windows.

“The roofing thatch had to be changed every two or three years. This was something which the children loved, because it involved the astrological casting of an auspicious day when there would be no rain. The change had to be done quickly; removing the old thatch took a whole day, and the re-thatching was done the following day. So the house was open to the sky for a whole night, and the children could gaze at the moon and stars.

“But if the horoscope had been miscast and it rained, then we just had to sit in the rain, which was most uncomfortable. The children, always after adventure and fun, used to sing the rain-begging song: ‘Nang maeo euy, khor chang, khor fon, khor nam-mon rot hua nang maeo’ (‘Lady cat, they tell us to ask for rain, to ask the sacred water to shower on the lady cat’s head’).

“The grown-ups, afraid of being rained on, would scold the children and forbid them to sing such songs. But in fact

the re-roofing always took place in the dry season and it hardly ever rained at all.

“Later the roof thatch was replaced with teak tiles.”

M.C. Duangchitr describes the various buildings which made up “Baan Plai Nern.” The main pavilion, which was like the “sala” in a temple, now consists of three rooms on the upper floor, with a balcony running all the way round.

“This pavilion originally belonged to a dignitary at the court of King Rama III and stood in front of Wat Rakang in Thon Buri. Prince Naris bought it to use as a parlour, with the front room for receiving guests and holding ceremonies such as offering food to monks.

“The second room is partitioned by three bookcases, with crayon sketches by the Prince above each. The drawings on the left and right show one of the Buddha’s disciples and a ‘thevada’ (angel) flying to meet the Buddha, who is shown in the centre descending from the Tawatimsa Heaven and performing the so-called ‘Double Miracle.’

“The third room in the pavilion contains the Prince’s dining-table and also a Chinese-style tribute table.

“To the west of the dining-room there was originally an open balcony, but later a wood-and-glass partition was added and the Prince used it as his study where he spent most of his time. The Prince’s bedroom and other personal quarters and those of his servants also formed part of the main pavilion.

An open balcony led to three other buildings. Traditional Thai-style houses were normally grouped facing one another with a surrounding and connecting balcony. “But this arrangement did not allow the breeze to circulate freely, and made the house stuffy and uncomfortable,” writes M.C. Duangchitr. “So His Royal Highness changed the layout to conform with the sun’s path, each house overlapping the next to allow the southerly breeze to flow freely through.”

Prince Naris died at the age of nearly 84, having collected a great many damaged and neglected but historic examples of Thai art. Nothing is in perfect condition.

After his death his family had to do a lot of repair work on the house and make structural alterations, so that the two-roofed “Baan Plai Nern” one sees today as one drives past

along Rama IV Road is not quite the same as when Prince Naris lived there. (In fact the house was physically moved back from the road some years ago when the traffic started getting heavy. This can, of course, be done with Thai "prefabs"! ) But it still vividly retains the charm and atmosphere of that period 70 years ago.

Although 75 per cent of the items in the art collection are half-ruined, they are still worth seeing on the two days each year when "Baan Plai Nern" is open to the public. They give a fine overview of all that is best in Thai art.

The proceeds from Naris Day go to the Naris Fund, which grants seven or eight prizes each year to the best students of Thai art from all over the country.

# **The Rattanakosin Bicentennial**

## **(1) What does it mean?**

I would like to explain — to the best of my knowledge! — what is meant by the phrase “Rattanakosin Bicentennial.” For those who already know — well, it’s up to you whether you go on reading this or not. (But then, it always is, isn’t it?)

For new arrivals to Thailand, and for any others who aren’t too sure, I’ll try to explain. To the experts and to all my Thai friends: If I’ve not got it absolutely right, please accept my apologies and be assured I’ve done my best.

The simple answer, as everyone probably knows, is that 1982 was the 200th anniversary of the founding of Siam’s capital city in Bangkok. NOT the founding of Bangkok! Bangkok as a place — at first a village, then later a busy riverside trading station and harbour of international importance to Siam — had already been right here in the same spot for some two or three hundred years before 1782.

And “Bangkok” was its Thai name before 1782, “bang” meaning a riverside village, and “kok”, shortened from “makok”, being variously translated as “olive,” “wild plum” or “hog plum” according to taste (I wonder what the original fruit which grew here did taste like?)

Therefore, it’s wrong to refer to 1982 as “the Bangkok Bicentennial.”

Now, most foreigners are also aware that all Thais refer to Bangkok as “Krung Thep” — “City of Angels” — and have done so since soon after it became the capital 200 years ago.

Then why isn’t this year being celebrated as the “Krung Thep Bicentennial?”

Because Bangkok isn’t the only Siamese capital to have

been called "Krung Thep;" Ayutthaya, during its time as capital from 1350 to 1767, was also called "Krung Thep." In fact it was called "Krung Thep Maha Nakhon Bovorn Thavaravadi Sri Ayutthaya" ("Sri" means "splendour"); perhaps there were also other words in its fullest version, but I'm not on very sure ground here, so I'll leave it at that.

When one writes "Krung Thep" as a postal address in Thai, one adds a special sign after it which is equivalent to "etc." This is to indicate that "Krung Thep" is only a very shortened form for what is said to be the world's longest place-name.

King Rama I, the Founder of the present Royal House of Chakri, gave the new capital which he established in Bangkok a very long and resplendent name which I'm sure most readers know about too, even if they can't recite it by heart; in Thai the first few words of this name are "Krung Thep Maha Nakhon Amorn Rattanakosin..." which can be interpreted as "City of angels, great city of immortals, magnificent jewelled city of the god Indra...", OR as "City of angels, great city, residence of the Emerald Buddha..."

Now I'll quote from the official document circulated by the Fine Arts Department:

"On the auspicious occasion of the bicentenary of the founding of Bangkok in 1982, His Majesty's Government has resolved to hold a nation-wide celebration to mark the momentous milestone and to call further blessings upon the Kingdom according to the age-old traditions.

"Bangkok was established as the capital city of Thailand in 1782 by King Phra Buddha Yod Fa, entitled Rama I, who founded the present ruling Chakri Dynasty after having successfully managed through inspired and arduous persistence to unite and consolidate the country.

"Since then, there have been three celebrations to bless the city on auspicious occasions, the first one being held immediately upon completion of its establishment at the express command of its Royal Founder. The second was the centennial celebration witnessed in 1882 during the reign of King Chulalongkorn the Great or Rama V. The third celebration was decreed by King Prajadhipok or Rama VII in 1932 to mark the 150th Anniversary of the city's founding.



“All these three previous celebrations were limited mainly to Bangkok and its immediate vicinity on the presumption that the capital city was the administrative centre of all affairs of the Kingdom and thus the physical symbol of the whole nation.

“This forthcoming Bicentennial Celebration, however, will be held on a truly nation-wide basis covering Bangkok and the other provinces within the Kingdom. Its objective is to commemorate the great achievements of the successive Kings of the present Chakri Dynasty who have each managed the Affairs of State in such a suitable and successful manner as to ward off all kinds of threatening dangers and lead the nation towards increasing welfare, stability as well as peaceful prosperity.

“For the above reasons, the city of Bangkok is being called in the title of this latest celebration by its official name of “Rattanakosin” which implies a wider significance of being the Residence of the most revered Emerald Buddha and land of the Mighty Kings of the Chakri Dynasty...”

The word “Rattanakosin” means either “the Gem of the god Indra” or “bright green stone” and hence the City of the Emerald Buddha.

And here I think that fine lexicographer Dr George Bradley McFarland, MD, sums it all up excellently in his Thai-English Dictionary: “Rat,” “Ratana”: A gem, jewel, glass, crystal, precious stone; a valuable, precious or desirable thing. “Rattanakosin”, Indra’s precious gem or jewel, applied by the Thai people to the Emerald Image of Buddha and as a name for Bangkok or the era commencing with the founding of Bangkok.” (Perhaps he should have added “as Siam’s capital city”).

Perhaps it’s because the god Indra is considered to be green-coloured that the phrase has come to mean the Emerald Buddha.

The real significance of the term “Rattanakosin” to mean the Chakri Era in which Bangkok has been and remains the capital city, is that General Chakri, soon to become King Rama I, brought the Emerald Buddha Image, the most sacred of all Buddha images in Thailand, to Thon Buri from Vientiane in 1778. Apart from a brief six years in Thon Buri,

Bangkok was the first permanent THAI capital city in which this image has ever resided. It was never in Ayutthaya, nor in Sukhothai.

## **(2) Getting ready for the big month**

In February 1982 I was invited to see the preparation of the decorations for Rajdamnern Avenue and meet the Governor of Bangkok, Admiral Tiam Makarananda, who was also coming to inspect the preparations to make sure everything would be ready in time for the Bicentennial celebrations in April.

The decorations were being made by a team of craftsmen in the old Bangkok World building in Phrasumane Road near Rajdamnern Avenue, premises which were lent free to the city administration for the purpose.

Here, in the ground-floor area where the printing presses used to be, some 20 men, mostly students from Poh Chang School of Arts and Crafts, were hard at work producing 25 large-scale Bicentennial emblems — the now familiar design with its two “thevadas” or celestial beings facing each other topped by the symbol of Bangkok as the heavenly “City of Angels,” as well as various other decorations.

There was a supervisor from the Fine Arts Department, and the whole preparation was under the care of a youngish government official who was doing this for free in his spare time.

I stood there staring open-mouthed, bewitched once again by Thai manual skill and craftsmanship.

The Bicentennial emblems were being painted on hard-board, each emblem about six feet high or more; photographic slides of the pattern had (I presume) been previously projected onto each piece of hardboard, and the design traced on manually in pencil.

Each emblem was being hand-painted in colours by a team of men, step-by-step; one man painted each colour, then moved on and repeated the process on the next emblem.

Many of these emblems were already complete and

stacked against the walls; others were having the final gilding applied — with gold paint, not gold leaf, which would be too time-consuming; the elaborate brushwork was taking only a few minutes to execute.

On a wall nearby were displayed coloured scale drawings of the final scheme of decorations for Rajdamnern Avenue, including the individual emblems of each of the eight previous Chakri kings (did you know each of them had his own separate emblem? I didn't, though I suppose I should have done).

Each king's emblem was the "colour of the day" on which he was born — red for Sunday, yellow for Monday, pink for Tuesday and so on.

Some of these large circular royal emblems were also in the process of being made and painted while we were there.

While we were waiting for the Governor and the Rattanakosin committee to arrive, we watched a different kind of craftsman at work; I don't know exactly what to call him, except perhaps an "artist in cloth," and he was making what I can only describe as huge rosettes, about three feet across.

He had two bolts of cloth, one of very pale lilac and the other deep purple, and he was working these into a series of pleated loops on a circular hardboard base, using rapid and almost jerky movements of the fingers and thumb of one hand, fastening each loop with stout steel wire.

I was told this young man was a specialist in this particular art, having learnt it from his family and more or less brought up from childhood practising it.

It took him about an hour to make and arrange the concentric pattern of loops and nail them to the board; and I must say when that stage was finished, the result didn't look in the least attractive — just a mass of rather dull loops of cloth.

Then, hey presto! He began to kind of *worry* each loop with his hands, like a puppy or a kitten, opening out the cloth; or, to give another analogy, it looked almost as if he was plucking the strings of a harp very rapidly!

The result was fascinating, almost unbelievable. Instant dressmaking, giant gift-wrapping... The whole rosette was

suddenly transformed into a thing of great beauty, like a rosebud opening into full flower.

Well, maybe Christian Dior or Yves St Laurent can work that same kind of magic with cloth, too; I wouldn't know. But there in that interconnected series of deserted stone-floored rooms in Phrasumane Road, along with the rosette-maker's skill, all those delightful Thai Bicentennial artifacts that graced Rajdamnern Avenue during the Rattanakosin celebrations in April 1982 were slowly taking shape.

### **(3) The Royal Barge procession**

"Ladies and gentlemen, would you PLEASE sit down..."

For perhaps the twentieth time, the polite but insistent and slightly exasperated voice of the young lady from the Tourism Authority of Thailand came over the loudspeaker in faultless English; she went on: "...so that those behind you can see the procession."

But human nature being as it is, what seemed like ten million tourists and local people totally ignored her request — though, luckily for those of us less fortunately placed, mostly just for a moment's camera-clicking, after which they did sit down again.

And you couldn't blame them, really. For this was the Bicentennial's Royal Barge procession, the first time such fantastic pageantry and splendour had been seen for over 14 years.

The last time was on the afternoon of October 27, 1967, when His Majesty the King was borne in a similar procession to donate new robes to the monks at Wat Arun, the Temple of Dawn, after the end of the rainy season. My memories of that previous procession, which I also saw (from a riverside school compound in Thon Buri) had been largely of the strange, unfamiliar wailing sounds of conch-shells and pipes being blown; sounds which came floating down the river while the flotilla of 39 magnificent craft were still tiny specks far away upstream. (Someone recently lent me a tour guide's handbook for the 1967 procession; that's how I known there were 39 craft.) The rest was just a soft, glowing

blurred memory of a majestic symphony in red and gold floating past on the water.

This time it was different. Some kind Thai friends in the travel and tour business had invited me to come with them to see the procession at the Royal Navy Club compound at Tha Chang. We left one of Bangkok's big hotels at 6.30 a.m. — a mixed group of tourists from all over the world, it seemed, and my friends with their own Thai friends — in a big tour coach.

As we drove through the almost deserted streets, I wondered why it all seemed vaguely familiar. Then I realised: this was what the traffic in Bangkok's streets used to be like 16 years ago, all through the day!

We were lucky; although our numbered seats were some distance back from the water's edge, they were three rows up above ground level, so we could see most of the barges as they passed slowly by, most of the time — in spite of the many rows of up-popping camera-clickers in front of us.

I bought myself a Rattanakosin hat in aid of charity — and also of my head; but we were again lucky with the weather — the sun, though right behind us, was also behind a reasonably decent layer of cloud.

Long before the wonderful procession came into view, we heard the chanting of the six "pleng heh reua" or boat songs relayed from the barges by radio and picked up through the loudspeakers. These songs are in the minor key and the pentatonic scale which leaves out the fourth and seventh notes (F and B) in the octave. They are haunting and very, very lovely.

This time there were 51 craft. The flotilla was in ancient naval battle formation, and as in the 1967 procession there were three parallel lines or rows of barges, with the main row in the centre, including the three major Royal Barges near the rear. The procession was nearly a kilometre long; it proceeded (I would guess) at about one mile an hour, and it took an hour from its start at the Vasukree Pier to its finish at the Rachavoradit Landing near the Grand Palace.

More than 2,000 boatmen (actually Royal Navy sailors) manned the craft, and the whole procession was a feast of colour, sound and beauty like nothing else anywhere in the

world.

Even the 32 escorting or “complement” barges in the two outside rows were splendidly ornate, carved and gilded affairs. I believe (though I’m not sure) that each barge in the procession was originally carved out of a single (teak?) log. The rhythm of the oars in some of the craft was controlled by two men with large black wooden staffs draped with white tassels at intervals so that they looked from a distance like surveyors’ poles; these they thumped down regularly on the deck.

And the *uniforms*...! Different, brilliant colours on different craft; mostly red, but individual figures stood out in vivid turquoise, purple, green, blue, gold and a few men in white with pointed white hats representing protective Brahmins or “thevadas” — guardian angels.

As the procession approached us, the loudspeakers gave way to the actual chanting from the barge crews, easily loud enough to need no electronics.

The magic of history hung in the air... This was old Siam’s pomp, tradition, and indeed national security brought to life again, so that modern Thailand could take pride in its nationhood and its great former kings. Royal barge processions are recorded from the Ayutthaya Period; in the 17th Century a similar procession bore the Royal Letter from King Louis XIV of France to King Narai the Great.

Some of the barges in the centre rows had prows (and names) representing well known demon and monkey characters from the great Thai epic story, the “Ramakien.” And now, music from some of these barges came to us across the water — the wailing sound of the “bpee chawa” or classical Thai pipe which I remembered from back in 1967, and other instruments.

After all of these and most of the escorting barges had passed, slowly, slowly came the first of the three great Royal Barges: Anantanakarakaj with its carved and gilded prow representing a seven-headed “naga” or serpent.

On this barge, inside a “busabok” or tall spired pavilion with a throne, was borne a revered Buddha image called Phra Putta Chai Lang Chang, or the Buddha Image of Victory on Elephant-Back, because King Rama I carried this



image with him in this manner whenever he went into battle, for protection.

Then came the chief Royal Barge, Suphannahongs or the Golden Swan, with its huge prow soaring 15 feet above the water and draped with an enormous fresh-flower garland. On its deck, on a throne beneath a “ganya” or decorative gabled roof amidships, were Their Majesties the King and Queen; in front of them were His Royal Highness the Crown Prince and Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn.

Suphannahongs was built in the reign of King Rama I, and rebuilt and enlarged in King Rama VI's reign. It is 146 feet long; its crew of 57 men include 50 oarsmen whose gilded oars follow a fixed rhythm: Poised just above the water for a few seconds; then plunged into the water to paddle, out again and up high above their heads in a single sweeping arc; held steady there on high in a “V” formation called the “nok bin” or “bird flying” position for a few seconds; then down to just above the water again. Truly, wonderfully, uniquely Thai.

The third and last major Royal Barge, Anekchartphuchong, bore Their Royal Highnesses Princesses Chulabhorn and Soamsawali and Princess Chulabhorn's Royal Consort, Flying Officer Virayuth Didyasarin.

When it was all over, our host had very thoughtfully arranged for us to avoid the massive traffic jam by organising a boat which took us back to the Oriental pier — a delightfully refreshing trip.

And then — a quite traumatic experience: We saw the whole procession over again. All of it. Really. On television, back at my friends' house, where they had equally thoughtfully arranged for their servant to videotape it.

Now THAT could never have happened in the Ayutthaya Period.

Or, come to think of it, in 1967 either.

## **(4) Phra Sayam Devadhiraj**

As I just said, modern technology in the form of videotape

enabled me to see the entire Royal Barge procession *twice* in the same morning — the first time in real life from the river bank, and the second time on television.

Thailand hasn't yet got the video-telephone, with which two people can have a phone conversation while smiling politely at each other on miniature TV screens — at least, if it's here I haven't seen it yet.

However, in the course of trying to find out more about that rather mysterious image known as Phra Sayam Devadhiraj, I came quite close to having such a video-telephone conversation with a very friendly and helpful official in the Grand Palace — thanks to the 1982 telephone directory.

This particular directory, in both its Thai and English versions, bears (or bore, in case you're reading this after 1982) on its front cover the most fantastic aerial colour photograph of the Grand Palace that I've ever seen — every building picked out in the minutest detail, with the Emerald Buddha Temple complex in the foreground.

My courteous informant at the Palace was trying to explain to me exactly where the Paisal Taksin Hall is, in which Phra Sayam Devadhiraj (pronounced “teh-wa-ti-raht” in my own Romanisation system) normally resides, and where the Dusit Maha Prasad Throne Hall is, in front of which the image was specially installed for the general public to pay homage to it during the Rattanakosin Bicentennial celebrations in April 1982.

I'm hopeless when it comes to names of buildings, and I must also admit that it was at least 12 years, probably more, since I had last visited the Grand Palace. So when our phone conversation began getting rather technical, with the Palace gentleman at the other end of the line bandying names of buildings around until I was getting a bit out of my depth, I asked him if he'd mind waiting a moment while I got a copy of the telephone directory. After I'd done so, he asked me if *I'd* mind waiting while *he* also got hold of a copy.

So there we were, a few miles apart, with him telling me exactly where to look for the Paisal Taksin Hall and the Dusit Maha Prasad Throne Hall, on that marvellous cover picture... Our combined thanks must surely go to the Tele-

phone Organization of Thailand — even if I did rather mutilate our office copy by scribbling all over it!

It was really quite an unusual conversation, because there are so many historic, important and lovely buildings within the square kilometre enclosed by the Grand Palace walls. It was rather like playing a game of chess over the telephone.

In fact I wonder if the two of us have set up some new kind of record by using the front cover of a telephone directory in order to have a telephone *converssation*...?

The information I gained about Phra Sayam Devadhiraj appeared in one of the Bangkok Post's four colour pictorial Rattanakosin Bicentennial supplements, but it's worth repeating here — and adding a little bit to.

I learnt that during the reign of King Mongkut from 1851 to 1868, the King felt that Siam had long faced crisis after crisis in her past history, and on many occasions had very nearly lost her independence; yet each time, the country had succeeded in remaining free.

It therefore seemed to King Mongkut that a special guardian angel was protecting the nation; so, to pay homage to this deity, he had a gold image cast and gave the deity its name of "Phra Sayam Devadhiraj," which means "Greatest guardian angel of Siam."

Ever since then, this sacred gold image has been worshipped as the nation's guardian spirit and has resided on a special throne in the Paisal Taksin Hall, which is inside the Inner Palace and therefore not normally accessible to the public.

However, for the Bicentennial celebrations the image was installed inside an elaborated gilt "busabok mala," a throne with four corner pillars supporting a spired roof, on a Thai-style balcony in front of the Dusit Maha Prasad Throne Hall, which is in the Outer Palace and was one of the first Palace buildings to be constructed in King Rama I the Great's reign.

On April 7, 1982 Their Majesties the King and Queen presided over a Royal homage-paying ceremony to Phra Sayam Devadhiraj, and every day until the end of April members of the public sat on the ground outside the Grand Palace walls and then queued patiently for their turn to pay

homage to this most sacred guardian of the Thai nation.

Yet for a non-Thai like me, there's still a certain amount of mystery about this image. That I had never heard of it until the Rattanakosin Bicentennial celebrations — well, there's nothing very strange about that; there are probably a thousand other things, known to every Thai, which I've never heard of.

But why had some Thais never heard of this image before — though they had heard its name as a deity or guardian angel? Why, for instance, out of two of my young Thai office colleagues, both about the same age, had one of them learnt at school about the existence of the image, while the other had not, and had always regarded “Phra Sayam Devadhiraj” as just an idea?

Maybe it depends on which school one went to...



# CHAPTER TWO

# CEREMONIES





## **Tet (Tesna) Mahachart — a special Buddhist ceremony**

In March 1981 I attended a Buddhist religious ceremony which was quite new to me. But it is in fact a very ancient ceremony, and is based on a story which has been well known and popular among the Thai people ever since the Sukhothai Era in the 13th Century.

The story is that of the last great human life of the Buddha-to-be (or the Bodhisattva) before he was reborn as Prince Siddhartha in the life in which he attained Enlightenment and became the Buddha.

The individual who was the Bodhisattva in that penultimate human life was named Prince Vessantara (Phra Wessandorn in Thai). As a piece of Thai literature, the story, known as "Mahachart" ("The Great Life"), is still known today to almost every Thai, because it's taught in almost every school in the Kingdom.

The tradition of monks preaching the "Mahachart" story also goes back to Sukhothai times. In the Ayutthaya Period which followed, this tradition developed and matured into a more refined, formal shape, the "Mahachart Sermon" or "Tesna Mahachart." ("Tesna," meaning a sermon, is pronounced "tet" in Thai). The "Tesna Mahachart" tradition has continued until today, and the ceremony of chanting the "Mahachart" story is held annually at every temple in Thailand. However, the various rites associated with the ceremony, as well as the style of chanting, have varied from century to century and still vary today in the different regions

of the country — the North, Northeast, Central and South.

From what I can gather by talking to friends and to my wife, most Thais know about this ceremony, as well as being familiar with the actual Phra Wessandorn story.

As with so many ancient Thai traditions, it's probably true to say that this ceremony is perhaps better known in the countryside than in Bangkok, where the younger generation in particular have heard of it but may not know its full significance as well as those upcountry.

Since the ceremony is an important item of Thailand's cultural heritage, the Thammasat or Chulalongkorn University Dharma Centre held a special demonstration of the "Tesna Mahachart," and it was this ceremony that I attended. The purpose of this ceremony was to discuss and remind people of the significance of the "Tesna Mahachart" in the Buddhist religion as well as in Thai literature, culture and society — and also to compare the different styles of delivering and chanting the sermon in the different regions of the country. For this purpose, monks had been assembled from all over Thailand, each monk an expert in one particular episode (or "gan" in Thai), of which there are altogether 13 in the story of Prince Vessantara. ("Gan" is spelt "kantha" and is directly related through Indo-European to the word "canto" used in English. See Chapter 4 for other Indo-European connections.)

Chulalongkorn University is Thailand's oldest and most distinguished university, known affectionately to all Thais as "Chula." The demand for student places far exceeds the supply every year. The university recently completed a new building to house the Dharma Centre, including a large "sala" or meeting hall open on three sides. This has been designed along simple lines in a style that combines the ancient traditional atmosphere of the temple "sala" and modern trends in architecture and decor.

The demonstration "Tesna Mahachart" lasted for two whole days — Saturday and Sunday — from eight a.m. to five p.m. on the Saturday, and up to 10 p.m. on the Sunday. The discussions and comparisons of the regional styles and rhythms of chanting took place on the first day, while the actual formal chanting of the 13 episodes occupied most of

the second day from 8.15 a.m. until 9 p.m.

And what gave this university ceremony its special distinction was the fact that Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn was graciously sponsoring and presiding over one of the episodes — the “Kumara” (pronounced “gumarn” in Thai) — which according to the dictionary means “an infant, a boy, a son, a young prince.”

I was invited to attend the ceremony on the Sunday afternoon by my old friend and former colleague Professor Sampow Varangoon, until recently Head of the Audio-Visual Education Department at “Chula’s” Faculty of Education. He picked me up at home in his car, and we arrived at the sala in the university campus at about 1.45 p.m., just before the episode or “gan” called “The Great Forest,” sponsored by a committee of which the Professor is a member. As we approached, we could hear the final chanting of the previous episode.

There were decorations and gifts to the monks throughout the hall. Flags, bunting and paper money strung on threads fluttered in the strong breeze.

Some two or three hundred people were grouped around the three open sides of sala and inside — mostly members of the academic staff and university alumni, with a sprinkling of students and other people as well. High up on a lofty seat just in front of the rear wall sat the monk who was chanting, reading from a palm-leaf text. The wall itself, fluted vertically in austere dark polished teak, was decorated with lots of greenery — massive branches in pots, with brilliantly coloured birds and butterflies attached, to represent the forest in which much of the story of Prince Vessantara is set.

All the decorations in the “sala” were in fact donations to the monks who had come from temples all over the country. As always, for those making the donations this was a form of “tam boon” or making merit. These donations were both in cash and kind — and when I say “kind” I’m thinking especially of huge bowls fruit, as you’ll see later.

All donations were placed on top of the traditional Thai pedestals called “pahn.” One highly decorative item which caught my eye (because it happened to be moved to a spot just in front of where I was sitting sideways on the floor during

the ceremony) was a tall, thick, round-topped wax candle set on top of its “pahn.” All round and all the way from top to bottom of the candle, one-baht coins were stuck half-way into the wax, so that the other half of the coins protruded outwards, giving the whole candle a silver-encrusted look. It resembled a sparkling miniature of the Emerald Buddha Temple spire or “chedi.”

But the most beautiful and striking donation of all was the one given by the Princess. It was positioned on top of a very large, multi-tiered, multicoloured “pahn” about six or eight feet high, and was an elegant model of a white-sailed three-masted ship (a “sampao” in Thai) something like a sampan or Chinese junk.

I was curious about the significance of this ship, and I found that the answer is allegorical, symbolic and rooted in antiquity. I'll try to summarise it.

The ship represents a movement across the ocean which figuratively separates the endless cycle of births, deaths and rebirths of all living beings (known in Pali as Samsara), from the Further Shore which is freedom and permanent release from Samsara and is the state of perfection in which all desires for pleasures are quenched for ever, called Nibbana (“Nippan” in Thai).

In order for the Bodhisattva or Buddha-to-be to reach this state of perfection through Enlightenment and become the Buddha, he had figuratively to cross this ocean.

The ship is symbolic of his two children in his immediately former life as Prince Vessantara, through whom he was enabled to be reborn as the one who would become the Buddha.

I won't go into the details of this story, but will simply mention what I've been told — that the Thais throughout their history have been greatly impressed by it.

As soon as the episode called “The Great Forest” came to an end, the monk who had recited it climbed down from his lofty seat and there was a short interval during which a Thai classical “piphat” band played its tinkling, delicate melody on the equal-tone-interval Thai musical scale which sounds strange to Western ears.

I was chatting with one or two old acquaintances just

outside the “sala” on the edge of the crowded audience — university lecturers whom I had known during my teaching days at “Chula” and hadn’t seen for the past eight years. So I didn’t see Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn arrive for her Royal-sponsored episode, the “Kumara.”

However, before the chanting of that episode began, I had the great honour of being presented to her briefly. She was completely charming and immediately put me at my ease with a warm smile.

That was how I came to be sitting among those right at the front for the next one-and-a-half hours. But “sitting” is perhaps not quite the right word for what the Thais call “ *nang pap piap*,” or squatting in a polite attitude with both legs tucked to one side behind one.

In fact I found myself hemmed in, squatting in this attitude with my hands held continuously in front of me in the “*Phanom meu*” or “*waiing*” position, facing two enormous bowls of fruit towering above me, so that the monk who had now climbed up onto the high seat to recite the “Kumara” episode was practically hidden from my view by papayas and decorative ferns. The only way I could get a glimpse of the monk was by shifting my head from side to side — an extremely difficult movement when squatting in the “*pap piap*” position, and one which may result in toppling ignominiously sideways onto the floor, or at least putting one’s back out...

Here are some of my general impressions of that wonderful ceremony. Firstly, for me it was once more, as so often in the past, the pleasant experience of being the one solitary Westerner among a large and devout gathering of Thais, and of being accepted courteously and with Thai natural good grace and charm, for what I am — just another human being.

Secondly, I’ll try to convey something rather intangible in words, and I hope all Thai readers will forgive me if I do it imperfectly.

There was something else typically Thai which I’ve often met before. The atmosphere of devotion, of pure piety towards the Triple Gem — the Buddha, the Dhamma or his



Teachings, and the Sangha or Buddhist monks — among those listening intently to the chanting, was almost palpable; it sort of hung in the air, and I could sense it strongly.

Yet on the fringe of the audience there were groups talking and laughing — softly, not heartily. And in their chat and laughter there was not any trace of irreverence; rather, the atmosphere was a typically Thai one, of “jai yen” or “cool heart,” and somehow there was no stark contrast between the devotion and the smiles and laughter — the two moods seemed completely compatible, and merged imperceptibly from one to the other. It was all a very moving experience.

As the monk chanted the Princess' sponsored “Kumara” episode, the Princess sat quietly on a raised wooden dais about a foot in height on the righthand side of the “sala” or hall. Before her on a cushion was a book with the text of the sermon, which she followed diligently word by word, page by page as it was being chanted. She too formed a living part of the atmosphere of devotion.

The chanting continued... The breeze was so strong that a 10-baht note on top of the vast heap of money donations inside the large bowl on one of the pedestals or “pahn,” took off and blew right across the hall. One of the Princess' ladies-in-waiting spotted it in time, and smilingly motioned a small girl in the audience to pick up the note and put it back in the bowl.

At last the chanting came to an end, and the monk stepped down from his high seat. I must confess I gave a small sigh of relief, for I had been sitting on the floor in the “pap piap” position with my legs tucked sideways behind me, and they felt very stiff and cramped — not to mention the pain in the ball of my ankle when it touched the floor.

The Thai classical “piphat” band struck up again, and there was a general stirring among the audience. Many people got up and donated more money and other gifts destined for the visiting monks and their temples all over the country. The television cameras whirled and flash bulbs popped all over the place as Her Royal Highness rose and walked over to light a group of eight tall candles.

However, no one made any motion of getting up to leave,

and as another monk climbed up onto the high seat I realised there was more to come. I bit my lip, then suddenly realised my legs weren't quite as painful as I thought, and shifted my weight slightly to listen to the second part of the sermon.

This lasted about the same length of time as the first part — roughly 45 minutes — although the second monk's style and rhythm of chanting was quite different. Towards the end, I discovered that by folding my handkerchief into a thick pad and putting it between my ankle and the floor, this made life easier...

Finally the "Kumara" sermon came to an end. The monk stepped down, and went to sit on a lower seat towards the left-hand side of the rear wall of the "sala."

Here a table was quickly set up in front of him, and, the Princess presented him with a new set of monk's robes ("pa-trai" in Thai) just as is done at a "Tod Kathin" ceremony. After that she gave him a huge bundle done up in plastic containing blankets, cushions and other necessities.

The Princess then had tea with her university hosts, after which she listened to two more episodes, although she had other engagements to fulfil. She is truly a busy, hard-working, sympathetic and gracious young lady.

Soon afterwards my friend the professor and I left too. That evening and the next day, I felt as stiff and wind-burnt as if I'd spent the previous day jogging in the sun...

But as I said, the "Tesna Mahachart" demonstration ceremony at Chulalongkorn University was for me a wonderful and unusual experience. Once again, I learnt a little bit more about the Thai people.

## **Dhevo-Rohana — a Northern almsgiving ceremony**

I have received some details and pictures of a Thai Buddhist ceremony rather less well known than most others. It is called the Dhevo-Rohana almsgiving ceremony, and as far as I know it is associated mainly with northern Thailand. It takes place every year at the end of the three-month Buddhist Lent in October.

My informant is a kind friend whom I've never actually met but with whom I've corresponded on and off during the past three years. She is Dr Sumitra Suwannabha of the Faculty of Humanities at Chiang Mai University, and I am indebted to her for the information that follows.

The Dhevo-Rohana ceremony is held every year in Chiang Mai under the auspices of the university at Wat Fai Hin, a temple under the patronage of the university's students and staff. Chiang Mai University is, I believe, the only Thai university with its own temple.

Wat Fai Hin, the "stone dyke temple," is said to be several hundred years old. It is said that a much revered northern monk, Phra Kru Ba Mara Sri Wichai, whose name means "glorious conqueror of evil," was once its abbot. More recently, from 1855 to 1914 A.D., Phra Apai Sarata, the first "Chao Khana Changwat" of Chiang Mai, was abbot there. ("Chao Khana Changwat" means the head monk among all the monks in a province, and the term "Apai Sarata" was bestowed on this particular monk by King Chulalongkorn or Rama V).

Later, this once famous temple at the foot of the mountain slipped into obscurity. The lay folk who lived nearby moved elsewhere, and the temple fell into disuse.

But all things change in the course of time. Having fallen from its original fame and prominence, Wat Fai Hin's fortunes again took a turn for the better. Chiang Mai University was established nearby, and in 1969 the temple was officially adopted by the university. Students and staff members now go there to gain calmness and peace of mind. And, of course, also in order to preserve Thai Buddhist traditions, among the most important of which is the Dhevo-Rohana ceremony.

During the 25 centuries since the Buddha's lifetime, a vast traditional literature of legends has evolved, and one of these forms the basis of the Dhevo-Rohana ceremony. It is said that the Buddha made a journey to heaven to preach the Doctrine as an act of filial piety to his mother.

The day he returned to earth was named Dhevo-Rohana Day — the 15th day of the waxing moon in the 11th lunar month. The following day, the legend says, a great gathering of devotees celebrated the Buddha's return. This great event has been commemorated every year for many hundreds of years on the first night of the waning moon of the 11th lunar month, which coincides with "Wan Ork Phansa", the end of the Buddhist Lent.

The site of the temple, in its beautiful mountain setting, 367 metres (1,200 feet) above sea level, makes it an ideal spot for this magnificent ceremony.

All Buddhist ceremonies, from laying the foundation-stone for a new office or hotel to cutting a child's topknot, are opportunities for lay people to give alms to monks, and in the case of the Dhevo-Rohana ceremony this is its main purpose. The ceremony is organised by the university's academic staff and students as well as the local people of Chiang Mai, who thus help to preserve Thailand's Buddhist tradition. Some 400 monks take part and 10,000 lay people attend.

The Buddha image leading the long procession of orange-clad monks slowly down the steps from the temple makes a unique sight every year, evoking the idea of the Buddha's descent from heaven, and bringing a feeling of peace and serenity to the onlookers, Thais and foreigners alike.

The Buddha image, Phra Buddha Dhevo Rohana Sri Sakya Muni, is carved out of teak and covered with gold leaf. Together with the lotus pedestal on which it stands, it is over two metres high.

## When Jiap became a monk

In 1976, soon after I became a Buddhist, I entered the monkhood for four weeks. My stepson Jiap (Laddawan's son) was my "look-sit" or temple attendant; he swept my "guti" or monk's cell every day, washed my saffron robes, and generally looked after my material well-being.

Almost exactly six years later, in March 1982, it was Jiap's turn to enter the monkhood for a brief period. The roles weren't exactly reversed, except for one very important feature: when I was a monk, Jiap (and all lay people) "wai'd" to me, and I did not return the "wai"; when Jiap was a monk, I "wai'd" to him — and of course he didn't "wai" back either. This isn't a personal thing; one "wai's" to the saffron robes and what they represent — the temporary (or sometimes permanent) mode of life with its renunciation of the material things of this world, in accordance with the Dhamma or Teaching of the Lord Buddha.

In the book "THAI WAYS," the forerunner of the present book, I have described briefly the pre-ordination ceremony of a "nahk" or monk-to-be, and even more briefly the ordination ceremony itself. The pre-ordination ceremony, as distinct from the actual Buddhist ordination ceremony itself, is entirely Brahmin, and may be omitted in whole or in part. In my own case, I chose to omit it entirely; in Jiap's case, only the final part of it was performed. However, the whole occasion was once again somehow very Thai.

The ordination took place on a very hot Sunday in March, but preparations involving many members of Laddawan's vast family seemed to have been going on for weeks beforehand. Little golden pedestals or "pahn" with trays or "kan" appeared around the house, together with a pair of beautiful little golden flowering trees, a gift to the temple from our landlady.

One Sunday about two weeks before the big day, Laddawan said Jiap must pay his respects to me as one of his elders. “Just sit down in that chair,” she said. I did so, and Jiap knelt in front of me, “wai’d” and presented me with one of the golden “pahns” on which was resting, as far as I remember, a packet of wax candles. Jiap then said to me in Thai, “If I have done you any wrong, please forgive me.”

“Wait a minute!” my wife called out to me, “you’re supposed to put 100 baht on the ‘pahn’ and give it back to Jiap so he can give it to the temple.” Unfortunately I didn’t have a 100-baht note — only a 500-baht one. So Laddawan opened a cupboard, took a 100-baht note from the house-keeping money and gave it to me. I put it on the “pahn” which I then gave back to Jiap, and that was the end of the little ceremony...

But not quite the end of the story; after Jiap had stood up again, Laddawan said, “Hey, let’s have that 100-baht note back!” And back it went into the housekeeping money in the cupboard...

In case this gives a false impression, let me add that the expenses of the whole ordination ceremony ran well into five figures, although in typical Thai fashion a good deal came back in the form of donations from family and friends — all in order to “tam boon” or make merit.

The day before the ceremony, by chance I met an earnest and very likeable young German writer who’d only been in Thailand a few days. “I want to see the real Thai culture and customs as much as possible,” he told me, so I invited him to Jiap’s ordination the following day. “Come to my house at 2.30 p.m.,” I said, and he eagerly accepted.

However, since I was officially Jiap’s “father” for the occasion, I had to go earlier to the temple with Jiap and Laddawan for the hair-cutting ceremony. So I left a note for my new young German friend to wait for me at the house because I didn’t think he’d be able to find his way to the small and little-known temple. Then off we went at one p.m.

At the temple there was a good deal of hanging around in front of the “bot” or main chapel; the ordination wasn’t due to start until 3.30. I spent some time learning a new skill: how to fold the petals of green lotuses into attractive shapes.



(Well, they should have looked attractive, but somehow mine looked more like a child's unsuccessful paper aeroplane!)

I also met my own father-in-law, Laddawan's father, for the very first time. He's over 70, tall and rather distinguished-looking, and is a permanent monk in another temple mentioned elsewhere in this book, Wat Suan Soam in Samrong. I squatted on my haunches and "wai'd" to him — on three counts, you might say: (a) because he's a monk; (b) he's older than I am; and (c) he's my father-in-law.

Eventually someone produced a packet of shampoo, and Jiap washed his hair at the standpipe tap; then he sat down in a chair (in the open) and there was a sudden hunt for scissors, which we realised we'd forgotten to bring with us from the house; I think in the end we borrowed a pair from the temple. Laddawan cut off few locks of Jiap's hair, then I did the same (with consummate skill I managed to avoid cutting off his ear) while a camera clicked away.

Meanwhile, the "glong yao" or long-drum troupe who had been hired for the procession arrived — about eight boys dressed in vivid yellow costumes from a school, arranged by a friend of Jiap's. (Persistent enquiries since then have failed to elicit any definite information about either the drums themselves — except that they're of Burmese or maybe Mon origin — or the significance, if any, of the yellow costumes.) They started playing, in a deafening but otherwise pleasant rhythm.

By now it was 2.25 and high time for me to go back to the house and pick up my young German friend.

As soon as the pair of us arrived back at the temple, things began to get moving; the drums began their deafening tattoo again, and although it was only 2.45, everyone started lining up for the procession. Evidently the ceremony had been put forward half-an-hour, though no one seemed to know why. As Jiap's "father", I had to carry his "talabat" or long-handled fan and his "batr" or almsbowl in the procession. Laddawan, carrying his new set of monk's robes, was immediately in front of me, and Jiap, now shaven-headed, wearing a gold-embroidered translucent white gown over a white shirt and white sarong, and carrying

three of those elaborately folded green lotuses in a “wai”, was immediately behind me. One of his friends shielded his newly-shaven head with a large crimson umbrella. The “glong yao,” banging away for dear life, headed the procession.

It was at that moment that I suddenly became aware of a pressing problem.

It really was urgent, for I knew that once the procession started it would be followed immediately by the ordination itself inside the chapel, and there would be no let-up for well over an hour...

Back in England, I would have buttonholed the nearest man and whispered discreetly “Er — excuse me, can you tell me where the, er, the ‘gents’ is?” But this was Thailand, and anyway whispering would have been useless with that din from the drums going on... At the top of my voice, I bellowed “Khor bpai hong-nam noi!” (“Please let me go to the toilet a moment!”)

The effect was electrifying. The drums stopped instantly. No one batted an eyelid, though I received one or two very sympathetic smiles — and one of my young nephews-in-law helpfully escorted me to the nearest comfort station, which proved to be a 200-yard walk in the grilling sunshine...

As soon as I returned, the drums struck up again (and when I say “struck”, I really mean it!) and off we went, in procession, marching in time to the rhythm — three times clockwise round the chapel. (I hope it wasn’t unorthodox of me, but not wishing to get sunstroke I shifted the “talabat” or fan from time to time so as to shield my head from the sun.)

After the third circuit, the drums stopped and we went into the chapel where the abbot and chapter of monks were waiting for us. As Jiap went in, he flung out handfuls of coins from a bowl, symbolising his temporary relinquishment of worldly possessions; these were gleefully pounced on by the crowd of relations and friends outside, as they’re supposed to bring good luck.

We then knelt and handed all sorts of elaborate gifts ceremonially to the monks. After that we sat in the “pap piap” position with legs tucked to one side and feet not pointing at anyone, as far as possible. (This is quite tiring for

Westerners like me, but I can manage; see also the section in this book on the ‘Tet Mahachart’ ceremony.) We stayed in that position throughout the 45-minute ordination ceremony, apart from occasional breaks when we knelt to hand over the robes and bowl.

Jiap had memorised — as I had done six years earlier — the 40 or so lines in the ancient Pali language which he had to recite. These included the 10 Precepts for novices — refraining from taking life, stealing, unchaste conduct, lying, drinking intoxicants, eating at the wrong time (from midday until after sunrise the following day), dancing, singing or watching entertainments, wearing garlands or any other adornment (even wristwatches are forbidden), lying on a bed or mattress, and accepting money.

There’s one rather tricky passage of Pali when the ‘nahk’ or monk-to-be is requesting admission into the order of monks, in which he is asked in rapid succession whether he has leprosy, ulcers, ringworm, TB or epilepsy (all these diseases were known in the Buddha’s time). To each question in turn he must reply ‘Natthi Bhante’ (‘No, Sir’). Immediately, without any pause, the next question follows: ‘Are you a human being?’ The ‘nahk’ must obviously be on his guard to answer ‘Yes, Sir!’ (‘Ama Bhante’) to this one, and to the next seven questions — are you male? Are you free from debt? Have you your parents’ permission to become a monk? And so on.

All these questions are asked and must be answered *twice* during the ceremony. Jiap managed alright the first time, but when answering the sixth question for the second time, ‘Are you a human being?’ he accidentally answered ‘No, Sir.’ The Preceptor said nothing, but just looked at him quizzically until he corrected himself: ‘Yes, Sir.’

In the middle of the ceremony, Jiap was hustled out of the chapel’s rear door to change into his monk’s saffron robes. And then — a touch of drama, missing at my own ordination — just before and as Jiap re-emerged in the monk’s robes, the ‘glong yao,’ waiting outside the chapel, struck up another thunderous roll.

Meantime, a ‘farang’ friend of mine, keen to get good colour photographs of the procession, had turned up at the

time I'd told him — 3.30 — only to find the ordination service already half completed.

Finally it came to an end. As we came out of the chapel I could feel my photographer friend's accusing eyes on me... Before he could say anything, I retorted to the look in his eye, "You've been in this country long enough to know that things often don't start on time. We started half-an-hour early!"

I haven't dealt with many of the smaller details and symbolism of the ceremony in this story; but I hope you've got some idea of what a Thai Buddhist ordination ceremony is like.

In the days that followed, I got up extra early, and Laddawan and I put rice and other food into Phra Jiap's bowl and "wai'd" him as he came to the house on his alms round.

## Paying homage to the teacher-gods

For centuries classical music, dance and drama have formed a deep and basic part of Thai culture, and they still do so today. They are also one of this country's major attractions for foreign visitors.

According to ancient Thai mythology, the god Phra Isuan (the Thai name for the Hindu god Siva) wanted to pass on to humanity the arts of music and the dance for the enjoyment of mankind. He found an old hermit living in a cave who had an exceptionally good memory. Phra Isuan taught the hermit all the techniques of playing different musical instruments and the intricate and graceful movements of the dance.

The god asked the hermit to pass on this knowledge to other teachers and so spread it throughout the world. The "Hermit" has thus become the symbol or father-figure of teachers of classical music and dance-drama throughout Thailand.

The "Hermit" plays the leading role in one of the richest, most beautiful and most interesting Thai ceremonies I have ever seen — "wai kru silapin," or the paying of homage to the spirits of bygone teachers of music and drama.

I have only seen this ceremony once, and that was several years ago. Like all "wai kru" ceremonies (paying respect to teachers) it was held on a Thursday, because Thursday is traditionally "teachers' day" in Thailand.

The "wai kru silapin" is, I believe, of very ancient origin. King Vajiravudh (Rama VI), who was very active in developing Thai classical music and drama, promoted and encouraged the ceremony and it was performed annually during his reign, on several occasions in his palace.

In recent times the Association of Classical Music and Drama has revived the ceremony. The association was founded in memory of the late Abbot of Wat Prapiraine, a

temple in Vorachak Road in Bangkok's Chinatown; until his death 13 years ago, the abbot had always befriended classical music and drama performers, especially those in any kind of trouble. As far as I know, the association still holds this magnificent ceremony every September at Wat Prapiraine, which is where I saw it.

On that occasion about 2,500 adults and children, ranging from about nine years old to over 70, crammed into the temple's sala or open-sided pavilion and overflowed all around it. Most of them were either professional performers, teachers or pupils of classical music and drama who had come to attend the ceremony from all over the country, especially from provinces traditionally associated with these arts such as Ayutthaya, Lop Buri, Samut Prakan, Ratchaburi and others.

When I arrived at the temple at about nine o'clock in the morning, the introductory Buddhist ceremony with chanting in Pali followed by offering food to the monks was already over. After that, no monks took part. The huge audience sat in chairs or on the floor around three sides of a large square apron stage, roughly 30 feet across.

On the left-hand side flanking the stage sat a 10-man classical "piphat" percussion band. This included two ranads (rather like curved xylophones) and two circles of gongs graduated in size from large to small, known as kong wong yai and kong wong lek. There were also other rhythmic instruments — tapones or barrel-shaped drums, klong tads, ching, chab and mong.

The focal point of the whole area was the rear of the stage, where a painted rainbow formed an arch-shaped proscenium, beneath which were several rows of ornate, brilliantly coloured face-masks arranged in a pyramid, about 60 in all. Each mask represented a different teacher-god of music or dance-drama. At the top of the glittering pyramid was the solitary mask of the god Phra Isuan or Siva.

In the second row were masks representing Brahma, creator of the universe, Phra Narai or Vishnu, and Phikanet, god of the arts. In the third row were the Hermit ("reusi" in Thai, the same word as the Hindi "rishi"), as well as Phra Wissanugam, the god of musical instrument design, Phra

Pirap, the spirit of teachers of music and dancing, Phrakorn-tap, the teacher of drums, and Panjasikorn the teacher of stringed instruments.

Among the masks in lower rows was that of Hanuman, the famous monkey-god of the "Ramakien" epic drama. There was also a photograph of King Vajiravudh dressed in the Hermit's costume — a tribute to the King who revived this ancient ceremony.

Below the pyramid of masks, the back of the stage was covered with food offerings — baskets of eggs, fruit, chickens and so on. A plain white sheet formed a carpet stretching along the centre of the stage from back to front, and pink lace curtains draped in various places completed the decor.

This ceremony is in fact a double one. The first part consists of paying homage to the teacher-gods, while the second part is a kind of graduation ceremony for students who have reached the required level of skill in classical music or dance-drama.

At half past nine the ceremony began with a prayer to the Buddha. The hero of the day was the Master of Ceremonies, a respected and experienced teacher of dancing from the Fine Arts Department of the Ministry of Education. He was dressed in white with a light-brown band round his head.

This indefatigable man performed non-stop for over six hours. After a series of short opening passages of music from the various provinces, the Master of Ceremonies did a short introductory dance at the front of the stage, after which the president of the association formally lit the candles. Water in an ornate bowl was next consecrated by allowing candle grease to drip into it, then a garland of green leaves symbolising the teacher-gods was placed in the bowl.

After some more music, prayers were recited to each of the gods and spirits of departed teachers — to Phrakorn-tap, Panjasikorn and other gods who taught gong-playing, singing and dancing.

At intervals smiling schoolgirls moved among the crowd with trays of iced coffee. It was quite warm in the sala, and the cold drinks were welcome. From time to time lighted joss-sticks were also handed to everyone in the audience.



One temple attendant was clutching huge bundles of smouldering joss-sticks in each hand when they unexpectedly burst into flame. For a moment he looked like an Olympic runner with two Olympic Games torches, and he certainly made an Olympic dash for the exit, where he succeeded in beating out the flames on the stone floor.

About halfway through the morning, the Master of Ceremonies invited each of the teacher-gods in turn to attend the ceremony. He did this by uttering a single syllable. This was not the name of the god, but of that particular god's or music-spirit's melody.

Each god or spirit of music and drama teaching has his own special melody which accompanies him wherever he goes; and after the Master of Ceremonies had uttered the name of each melody, the "piphat" percussion-band played that melody. The name of the next melody was then called out and played, and so on until about eight gods and spirits had been invited.

By now it was nearly midday. The Master of Ceremonies took hold of a five-foot-long pole with a decorated top representing the Hermit's staff, and put on the Hermit's magnificent golden headdress, decorated in red and pink with a hermit's face on it and garlands of jasmine hanging down on either side. Having donned the Hermit's costume, he went to the back of the stage and did a short dance to invite the Hermit's spirit to enter his own body.

The President of the Classical Music and Drama Association, which was responsible for the ceremony, went briefly on stage and poured holy water over small metal images of Phra Isuan (Siva) and other gods. After each god had thus been "bathed," he was then "clothed" by being anointed with a sweet-scented white paste.

Each god was then offered his favourite food by fixing a burning joss-stick in each of the many food offerings at the back of the stage. The Master of Ceremonies sprinkled holy water over the pyramid of masks, and this brought the first part of the ceremony to an end.

Now began the second part — the initiation rites for performers of classical music and dance who had reached the required proficiency in their art. Red-and-gilt carved

tables were set up to form an altar at the front of the stage. On them were placed the Hermit's headdress and the mask of Phra Pirap, the spirit of teachers of music and dancing. Alongside the masks were placed joss-sticks and flowers.

The initiation ceremony, known in Thai as "krob," is an event of great importance in the life of a Thai classical music or drama artist. It's the equivalent of gaining one's bachelor's degree, because it means that the performer in question has completed and fulfilled his training.

Anyone who wants to receive this official recognition may do so provided he or she has gained the required degree of skill. But many of the large crowd of over 2,500 at Wat Prapiraine that day were actually seasoned teachers who had already undergone the "krob" ceremony years earlier, and had now come to watch their own pupils take part in it, or to be "re-initiated" themselves out of respect for the Master of Ceremonies.

The first group, consisting of five young men, knelt before the altar. Behind it sat the Master of Ceremonies on a large cushion covered with a white sheet. More joss-sticks were lit. The Master of Ceremonies donned the Hermit's head-dress. Since he had already invited the Hermit's spirit to enter his body, it was the Hermit himself who would be performing the "krob."

A hush fell over the huge crowd. After a short recitation, the Master of Ceremonies placed the Hermit's headdress for a moment gently on the head of each young man in turn, followed by each of the other two masks. The first boy now put on his own mask and did a short impromptu dance. The other boys did the same, each dancing his own little invention. Then the Master of Ceremonies sprinkled holy water on the heads of the kneeling boys and anointed their foreheads with drops of sandalwood oil.

Next he placed three small squares of gold leaf on each boy's forehead. The boys were given the tissue paper separating the gold leaf to hold between their palms as they "wai'd." A necklace made of the sacred white "sai sin" cord was placed around each boy's neck.

With the greatest tenderness and care the Master of Ceremonies now rubbed the gold leaf off each boy's

forehead. This completed their "krob," and they were now "graduated."

The next group took their places kneeling before the altar — 10 girls and women, and two men. The same procedure was repeated for them. And so it went on until four in the afternoon, by which time some 600 performers had gone through their "krob" ceremony — and the apparently tireless Master of Ceremonies had performed non-stop for six and a half hours.

Later that same evening there was a band contest between the different provinces of Thailand noted for classical music and drama performances. It continued all night — or so I was told; I was no longer there — by which time the crowd had swelled to 5,000.

The "wai kru silapin" ceremony was certainly an exceptionally rich and dazzling one, and gave me some fresh and intimate glimpses of the subtleties of Thai tradition and culture.

## Lo Ching Cha — the Giant Swing Ceremony

Even before I first came to Thailand, I gathered from tourist brochures that one of the major sights of Bangkok was the Giant Swing. And since I arrived in this country I've passed the impressive, towering structure from time to time whenever I happened to be passing along that end of Bamrungmuang Road near Wat Suthat.

But I was always disappointed that unlike the garden swings of my childhood, there was no seat! Also, although I'd heard and read a lot about the famous Giant Swing Ceremony (called "Lo Ching Cha" in Thai — the Swing itself is called "Sao Ching Cha") I somehow never actually got to see this ceremony.

And no wonder. I've just discovered that it hasn't been performed since 1935!

In 1972 they started dismantling the Giant Swing in order to replace the old teak posts. Huge teak logs were brought down specially from Lampang in the North to make the new posts. There was a ceremony to bless the new posts at which the then Chief Brahmin of Thailand officiated. Everything concerned with the Giant Swing is Brahmin.

There were plans to revive the Swinging Ceremony itself in 1979, but nothing came of them, and it's very doubtful if it will ever be held again.

A document in Thai about the Swing Ceremony came into my hands. It gives something of the interesting history and background of this colourful ceremony. What follows is a rough translation and rearrangement of it.

Referring to the ceremony carried out near the Giant Swing in 1978, the document says this was the traditional Brahmin New year. Historically, this Royal ceremony dates

from the Ayutthaya period, and is for the purpose of inviting the gods Phra Isuan (Siva) and Phra Narai (Vishnu) to visit the earth. The ceremony therefore consists of two parts — “treeyampawai,” a reception ceremony for Phra Isuan, and “treepawai” for receiving Phra Narai. (These ceremonies are distinct from the Giant Swing Ceremony and are still performed every year at the Brahmin Temple.) As part of the gods’ retinue come the Sun, Moon, Phra Toranee and Phra Kong Kha (the spirits of earth and water), and the Nagas or mythical serpents also come to pay respect to the two gods. The Nagas then perform the Swing Ceremony, after which they throw water just as humans do during Songkran.

A procession carrying “u-loop” or flowers and rice on the shoulders is supposed to visit the King at night to bring him good wishes for the Brahmin New Year. As this is an agricultural ceremony to beg the Brahmin gods for good crops, in olden days the King asked his Minister of Agriculture to represent Phra Isuan and be Lord of the Swing Ceremony.

On the seventh day of the waxing moon in the second lunar month (actually some time in January) the ceremony starts early in the morning. The Lord of the Swing, dressed in full uniform, is carried on a Brahmin-style wooden board in a palanquin — a replica of the board used as a seat on the Swing. When the stage near the Swing is reached, the Lord of the Swing seats himself on a piece of bamboo, keeping his right foot on his left knee throughout the ceremony. Should he fail to do this (well, you try doing it for two or three hours!) he forfeits his fee of once “chang” or 80 a baht for performing the ceremony.

Now comes a description of the actual swinging, which sounds quite fascinating, if rather terrifying, to watch.

The Giant Swing has three teams of performers. Unlike the garden swing of our childhood days, the wooden board which serves as a seat is set lengthwise, along the same direction in which it swings to and fro. It’s rather like the swing-boats at a fair.

Each team consists of three men. The two men in the middle make the board move faster or slower by rocking and heaving, thus controlling the height reached at the end of

each to-and-fro swing.

The man in the "bow" has the hardest job of all. In front of the Swing is fixed a bamboo pole something like a fishing rod, from the end of which dangles a bag of money. The job of the man in the "bow" is to seize the bag with his teeth.

There are three different heights at which the bamboo pole is fixed — one for each of the three teams. Surprisingly, the document says the money from the lowest position is the most difficult to get. After this, the second, medium-height pole is put in position, and lastly the highest one, from which it's said to be the easiest to seize the bag of money.

And how much money is in the bags? Not very much: 12 baht, 10 baht and eight baht respectively.

There are two complete rounds of swinging, on the seventh and ninth days of the waxing moon of the second lunar month. The "Lo Ching Cha" is performed twice each day — in the morning, and again in the afternoon. When the Lord of the Swing has seen the contest, he moves to another stage to see the "nariwan" or Nagas and the god Phra Isuan dancing and playing at "throwing water." In 1978, only one of the original Giant Swing Ceremony performers was left since the time of the last ceremony in 1935.





# CHAPTER THREE

# CUSTOMS



## Ratana-tri — the Triple Gem

One never stops learning new facts, especially about a country and culture that are not one's own. As far as "Thai Ways" are concerned, I feel that I've probably done little more than reveal the tip of the iceberg, because that's all I know. And every once in a while I learn interesting new facts about something or other which it has never occurred to me to question before.

The reason behind all this preamble is that I recently learnt something quite new about that most familiar of religious offerings in Thailand — the "dorkmai-toob-tian," or a flower, a candle, and three joss-sticks. Some years ago when I was a Buddhist monk for a month and used to go out every day on the early-morning alms round with my fellow-monks, I was occasionally given this set of offerings in addition to the normal ones of rice and other food.

The food was of course put into my alms bowl, but the slender group in which the flower was usually a green lotus bud, plus the candle and the three joss-sticks, all held together by a small rubber band, had to be held separately outside the bowl.

This wasn't easy, as the bowl was hot (from the steaming rice inside it) and often quite heavy; besides which, there was always the need to concentrate on keeping one's robe properly arranged, and to try and avoid trading on sharp stones with one's bare feet.

Now, until recently I'd always imagined — without giving it deep thought or asking anyone about it — that the flower, candle and joss-sticks were symbols of the "Ratana-tri" or

Triple Gem — that is, the Buddha, the Dhamma or Teaching, and the Sangha or Order of Monks.

But then I found myself talking about this with a Thai friend, a knowledgeable man who had spent nine years of his youth as a “dek-wat” or temple-boy. “Oh, no,” he said. “It’s not that at all. This is a Brahmin custom, for you must remember that Brahminism is an older religion than Buddhism, and the Lord Buddha himself came from a Brahmin family.

“The flower represents all living or growing things, the unending continuation of life. And the candle and joss-sticks represent fire, which was worshipped by the Brahmins because it symbolises purification.

“Do you realise,” he went on, “that this Brahmin idea of purging by fire or flame came from the same origin as the flame on Mount Olympus in Greece, or the Olympic runner’s torch, if you like? And not only that — the Statue of Liberty in New York harbour is also holding a torch aloft, and that’s all part of the same original belief in purification by fire.”

“That’s certainly very interesting indeed,” I said. “But why are there always THREE joss-sticks? Surely THAT represents the Triple Gem, doesn’t it?” “Ah, yes,” he answered. “You’re quite correct about that.”

So at least my idea was partly right. And in that slim group of objects held together by a rubber band lies yet another glimpse of the combination of Buddhism and Brahminism which is so often met in this country.

The “Ratana-tri” or Triple Gem are held in the deepest possible reverence by all Buddhists in whatever country (which in Thailand’s case means something like 94 per cent of the total population). They lie at the very root of the Buddhist religion, because in paying homage to them, one is remembering the Buddha himself and his Enlightenment, the Dhamma or his Teaching of the Doctrine, and the Sangha or wise monks who listened and followed along the Path he showed them — and all other wise monks who have done so since.

One sees the “Ratana-tri” every time a monk or layman prostrates himself three times before the Buddha statue in a temple, or a householder does so before the statue in his

own "hong phra" or Buddha-room at home.

One also sees it in the "wien-tian" or "circulating the candle," which forms a part of major religious ceremonies, such as Visakha Pucha Day — the full-moon day in May which commemorates the birth, Enlightenment and death of the Buddha. The "wien-tien" also occurs during the pre-ordination ceremony of a new monk — although most of the other features of this ceremony are again of Brahmin origin.

Another Thai friend has given me some written details about "wien-tian". "There are three candles in each candle-holder," she writes. "The three candles represent the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. Altogether three holders are used, and the 'wien-tian' is performed for three rounds — again for the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha.

"In Royal ceremonies," she continues, "five types of holders are used: Glass, gold, silver, a gold-silver alloy, and copper. In upcountry ceremonies they may use bronze, wood, banana-leaf and so on."

## The Monkhood In Thailand

Life in Thailand today, as throughout the past, would be unthinkable without the Buddhist faith, and without the monkhood which is the cornerstone of that faith. The 250,000 or so quiet men in orange robes seen throughout the length and breadth of the land are an essential part of the inner fabric of Thai society at all levels, from the richest to the poorest, from the heart of the Metropolis to the remotest upcountry village.

Almost every aspect of daily life, and especially every ceremony, needs the presence of one or more Buddhist monks. While the monks themselves begin each new day at 3.30 a.m., their first encounter with the lay public is between 5.30 and 6.30 or 7 a.m. when they parade with their alms bowls on their "bintabat" or alms round, walking singly or in small groups along the streets and roads, lanes and footpaths among ordinary folks' homes.

For the layman or laywoman, the orange figures emerging out of the pre-dawn gloom in winter, or in the early morning sunshine (or rain!) at other times of the year, mean the chance to make merit by giving specially cooked food — nothing but the best. The householder first removes his or her shoes, and perhaps whispers some private wish, then puts the steaming-hot rice into the bowl which the monk uncovers by deftly removing the lid.

The monk or his "dek-wat" or temple attendant (usually a young lay boy living at the temple) also carries a "pinto" or stacked series of enamelled-metal or plastic containers into which the householder puts additional savoury dishes to be eaten with rice (nowadays these dishes are usually enclosed in transparent plastic bags) as well as dessert such as fruit or cake.

After this the householder makes an obeisance to the

monk, squatting down with the joined palms of his hands raised before his face in a "wai."

Millions of householders throughout the land make merit in this way regularly every morning; others do so once a week on their birth "day" (the day of the week on which they were born) or on "wan phra" or holy days — the days of the full and new moon and the quarter and three-quarter-moon days in between.

For his part the monk makes no gesture of recognition or thanks whatsoever. During the whole of the process of giving, he keeps his eyes fixed on his bowl, and never once looks at the householder. Nor does he replace the lid of his bowl too hastily after the rice has been put in, because that might imply that he didn't approve of its quality! After the "wai" the monk and the householder may perhaps exchange a few friendly words — especially if the monk happens to be the householder's son!

So, plying the streets and lanes in front of folks' dwellings early every morning, the monks play their essential part in Thai society by providing householders with the opportunity to make merit. And for the Westerner who temporarily or permanently enters the monkhood in Thailand, the daily alms round is a rich and moving experience.

Every monk walks barefoot, and at first the "tenderfoot" foreign monk may suffer a little from sharp stones; also, as the bowl is gradually filled with rice it may become a little heavy and hot against the body. But these are only minor discomforts, and one soon gets used to them.

But the early-morning "bintabat" is only one of innumerable opportunities for Thailand's society as a whole to make merit. A poor farmer or even poorer farm labourer may invite a solitary monk into his home in order to offer him a special, carefully prepared meal — and perhaps seek the monk's advice on some personal problem.

At the other extreme, there is a continual round of royal merit-making ceremonies in which Their Majesties the King and Queen and other members of the Royal Family take part — such as the casting of a new Buddha statue, or the raising of the "cho-fah" or gable-end of a new or restored temple, after which they make merit exactly as any other lay person



does, by giving food to the officiating monks.

And never a day goes by somewhere in Bangkok and other parts of the country without a ceremony which needs the presence of monks. Weddings and funerals are two of the more obvious examples.

Perhaps less so are cases such as the farm labourer's problem, which may be a serious one such as a tiny child who is somehow always sickly, never in really good health. In such a case the abbot or another monk from the local village temple may "adopt" the poorly child in a little ceremony which places the child's "kwan" or spirit under the kindly monk's care. Without ever leaving home, the child is usually cured and becomes as robust as his brothers and sisters.

No one would dream of laying the foundation stone or raising the corner-post of a new building without a formal ceremony involving chanting and blessing by monks — or at least one monk, but usually three, five or nine. (Nine monks is the most auspicious number).

The building may be a private house or a high-rise office block or hotel. And when the building is finished, and the family moves into its new home, or the luxury Chinese restaurant or new business quarters of an expanding company have their grand opening ceremony, once again the monks come and chant the words in ancient Pali, and bless the new premises by pouring holy water and anointing pillars and doors with fragrant paste; and once again, merit is made by offering the monks food afterwards..

Ceremonies such as these are always held during the earlier part of the morning, so that the monks' meal may be finished, without hurrying, before midday. After midday no monk may eat until after sunrise the following morning.

## Close-cropped hair and betel-chewing

Why do so many elderly Thai women wear their hair short, close-cropped like a man's? And why are they forever chewing betel?

I'll deal with one question at a time. As far as I know, there's no connection between the two. And I'd like to make it quite clear that I'm by no means an expert on either of them!

Although I've lived in Thailand for a good many years now, for some reason it never occurred to me to wonder why so many elderly women wear their hair very short. I think I more or less took it for granted that it was in order to keep cool. (Perhaps you thought that too!)

But it's just as hot and humid in other countries in the region, such as the Philippines; and elderly Filipina women certainly don't wear *their* hair short.

In fact it was only as recently as a few weeks ago that a Filipina friend drew my attention to this phenomenon as being peculiar to Thailand, and a Thai friend followed it up by quite casually mentioning the reason.

It's one of those things which every Thai takes for granted, but which Westerners (or this particular writer, at any rate!) don't always get to know about.

In fact I discovered that I already knew part of the story — or rather, a particular instance of it — without realising it was part of a general rule. So I'll start by relating this particular instance, in the form I have known it for several years.

It happened in the reign of King Rama I, Founder of Thailand's present Chakri Dynasty. It was towards the culmination of centuries of running wars against the Burmese; the year was 1785, three years after Rama I had

come to the Throne; and the scene was the southern island of Phuket.

An invading Burmese army was on the way, and the Governor of Thalang (the old name for Phuket) had just died. His widow, Khunying Jan, and her sister Mook had the task of defending the area. They resorted to a typical feminine ruse to confuse and frighten the enemy.

Rounding up all the local womenfolk, they made them cut their hair short to look like men, and dressed them up in soldiers' uniforms. Thousands of coconut-palm leaves were roasted over fires until they became blackened and curled, looking for all the world like the barrels of cannon. (There was only one real cannon in Phuket at the time.)

The mock "soldiers," brandishing their equally mock "cannon," were made to run in and out among the ranks of the real male soldiery of Phuket's rather small army and make as much noise as possible. In this way they managed to give the impression from a distance that the army was many times larger than its actual size, and positively bristling with guns and activity.

They also sneaked back into the town at night and marched out again next day, to give the impression that fresh men had been recruited.

Khunying Jan and her sister did other things too, and finally adopted a "scorched-earth" policy by having every scrap of food as well as all growing crops burnt, after which they gathered all the populace within the walls of the town in a state of siege. The Burmese army was faced with the choice of laying siege to the town and starving to death in the process, or retreating. Discretion proved the better part of valour, and they retreated. But there seems little doubt that the Burmese army's morale had already been severely weakened by the women's close-cropped hair and other male disguise, giving the Burmese the impression of being confronted by a vast army.

The grateful King Rama I bestowed new titles on both sisters. Khunying Jan became Thao Thepkasatree (Dame Goddess Lady) and her sister Mook was made Thao Srisunthorn (Dame Glorious Beauty). if you drive through Phuket Province you'll see a modern statue commemorating

these two Thai heroines at a crossroads in present-day Amphoe Thalang, a few miles before you reach Phuket town. The story of these two sisters is firmly embedded in Thai history, and is known to every Thai schoolchild.

This custom didn't end at the time of the Phuket victory; it continued long afterwards. I would guess it continued until about 60 years ago. Since then the habit has slowly died out. More and more Thai women and girls started growing their hair long and silky, as we see it today.

Now for betel. You can still see plenty of elderly Thai women with their teeth stained red from the continuous chewing of betel, especially upcountry.

The Thai word generally used for betel is "mahk" (spoken in a low tone, unlike the falling tone of "mahk" meaning "much"). Betel has always played a major part in Thai culture. "Mahk" is mentioned on the famous 13th-Century Sukhothai stone of King Ramkhamhaeng, said to be the earliest known example of written Thai in its present form.

And among the distinctions historically reserved for a "Chao Fah," the highest rank of Thai prince (the name means "Lord of Heaven," and is said to date back to the founding of the Kingdom of Ayutthaya in 1350 AD) were the fact that his betel tray and spittoon, both of them symbols of rank, were of gold with blue enamel; whereas lower ranks of prince had to make do with plain gold.

A common Thai expression for hard times or a period of scarcity is "khao yahk, mahk paeng" — "rice is hard to find, betel is expensive." This shows that rice and betel have long been considered equally fundamental to the lives of the people.

A rather more lighthearted expression is "jaek mahk," literally "to hand out betel" — in other words, to punch someone in the mouth and draw blood, giving them a red mouth like that of a betel-chewer. (The other half of this saying is "jaek waen," "to hand out spectacles" — that is, to give someone a black eye!)

"Mahk" has traditionally always played an important part in upcountry courtship and betrothal. A yong man who wants to woo a fair maid tears off a piece of betel leaf and throws it playfully at her. (Actually, the leaf he throws is call "bai plu;"

I'll explain this later on).

And, far be it from me to want to get mixed up in Women's Lib — but I must now point out that in Thailand it's the *groom* who brings the *bride* a dowry.

This is unlike other countries such as India, for instance, where the woman gives the dowry to the man; and in case some readers are confused about the meaning of "dowry" as I was, the Oxford Dictionary calls it "portion *woman* brings to her *husband*." There's probably a moral somewhere here for Thailand's Women's Libbers, but as I said, I refuse to get involved in it! (Anyway, I seem to have been giving my own wife, Laddawan, vast amounts of dowry ever since we got married, but she calls it housekeeping money).

The point of all this is that before an upcountry Thai formal engagement ceremony, the groom goes in procession to the bride's house to bring her dowry; and an essential part of this dowry is the "kan mahk" or ornamental bowl containing betel as well as the dowry money. My Thai-English dictionary says "kan mahk" also stands for the settlement demanded of the groom's parents by the bride's parents before marriage.

In fact, the engagement procession includes more than one "kan mahk;" the main one is called "kan ek" and it's followed by a second one, "kan toh." An old song is sometimes crooned plaintively by a forlorn bride to her reluctant groom who has failed to show up for the ceremony: "Eek ghee wan kan mahk ja ma?" ("In how many more days' time will the betel-bowl come?" — that is, "When will you come?") The song goes on, "Mai kan mahk!" ("I'm a betel-bowl widow!")

The "kan" or bowl carried in the procession rests on an equally decorative circular pedestal called a "pahn." Such sets of "kan" and "pahn" are an essential item in almost every Thai household. Each region of Thailand has its own style of "kan mahk," as does each level of society; a rich family will probably have a silver set, a poor one a wooden set or even one made from a coconut shell.

Earlier I mentioned "bai plu," the leaf out of which the suitor tears a piece and which he then throws at the girl of his fancy. Now I'd better go into some botanical detail, for I

feel sure some readers are wondering why I've been calling it "betel" all along, and not "betel-nut."

The reason is that it *isn't* "betel-nut." The Thai-English dictionary translates "mahk" as: "*The areca palm; areca nuts and betel leaves* smeared with lime, chewed like chewing gum." A very good description of the rather complex mixture of ingredients that is in fact chewed, and which I'll describe in a minute.

The areca nut and these other ingredients are placed on a leaf called "bai plu" or simply "plu" ("bai" means "leaf") which is then rolled, and the whole thing is popped in the mouth. The dictionary translates "plu" as *betel leaves*; the betel pepper, *Piper betel*."

The Oxford Dictionary supports these definitions. It says: "Betel: Leaf of *Piper betel*, which Indians chew with areca-nut parings; *hence by mistake*: betel-nut, the areca nut." So when we talk about "chewing betel-nut," strictly speaking we're not quite correct. For areca, Oxford says: "*Areca*; kinds of palms; areca-nut, astringent seed of a species of areca. (Portuguese, from a Tamil word meaning 'close-clustering nut')." "

Indeed, the areca nut does grow plentifully in Thailand in clusters on a species of palm tree. But from a Thai friend's description, I wonder why it's called a "nut," for she says it isn't hard at all. It sounds more like a fruit. Here's her description of it and its preparation.

For best chewability, it must be picked at exactly the right age — while it's still green, or else the flavour will be too strong. The fruit is one or two inches in diameter. Preparing it is an art which must be learnt by anyone who chews betel.

First it must be cut lengthwise, either into quarters or into six equal segments. From each piece the hard outer husk is removed along about three-quarters of the length, and the green peel is cut into segments which are bent gently outward away from the fruit. This reveals the inner flesh which is salmon-pink. It is this that forms the "nut" that is chewed; there's no stone or seed inside.

A large heart-shaped "bai plu" leaf is chosen, about six or eight inches across. The stalk is cut off, and the peeled areca nut is placed on the leaf together with red lime



("bpoon"), strong chewing-tobacco called "ya choon," and occasionally a leaf of "si-siad," which the dictionary translates as "cutch, *Acacia catechu*" (neither of which I can find in the Oxford Dictionary). Then the "bai plu" leaf with all its contents is rolled up and popped into the mouth. The "bai plu" has an astringent taste.

Why is betel chewed?

I asked another colleague to help me by "interviewing" her 75-year-old mother-in-law who lives in Petchaburi Province and is a confirmed betel-chewer. Here are the results.

Q. Why do you chew betel?

A. To pass the time, and sweeten the breath. It's also "aroy" — pleasant to the taste — and although you only chew it little by little, you become addicted, and can't stop.

Q. How long do you chew each mouthful?

A. About five minutes. Then I spit it out and mix a fresh lot.

Q. How much does it cost you?

A. About two baht a day. (But that was before the latest oil price increase!)

Q. So how often do you chew it every day?

A. Whenever I feel like it — say about 10 times a day.

Q. Does it harm the teeth?

A. No, but some older women with bad teeth put everything into a special kind of mortar first, and pound it all up to make it softer.

Q. Can you remove the red stain from the teeth?

A. Yes — we use a special kind of liquid called "ya ploy see" ("medicine to remove the colour") and clean the teeth with a dried areca husk.

Q. How old were you when you started chewing betel?

A. About 40 — and I'm still chewing away!

Q. How does one carry all those ingredients around with one?

A. In a basket, a cloth bag, a box, or sometimes even a leather bag.

Q. Do more women than men chew it?

A. Oh, yes — lots and lots of women!

So that, briefly, is what betel-chewing is all about. In the 1940s, when Field-Marshal Pibulsongkram was prime minis-



ter, he tried to abolish it by making it illegal. This was part of his overall "modernisation" drive which included the compulsory wearing of hats and Western-style trousers and shirts for men instead of the traditional "pa-kao-ma." The trousers and shirt have remained, but not the hats. As for betel-chewing... Well, I suppose the truth is that you can't keep a pleasant and apparently harmless habit down for ever!

Now that I've described the cutting and removal of the areca peel and the folding of the betel-leaf on which it is placed, I must expand on what my other friend told me: She said that the cutting and folding of the areca and betel for placing in the ceremonial "kan mahk" as part of an engagement ceremony is quite an art, like flower arrangement or garland-making, and one must be specially trained to be able to arrange a "kan mahk" properly.

She also mentioned in passing that "mahk" is used as a mordant in dyeing, to make the dye stick to the cloth.

Let me end as I began, by stressing the great importance of "mahk", or areca-plus-betel, in Thai culture. In "Esahn" or Northeastern Thailand. "mahk" has traditionally held the broader meaning of "fruit" in general. Over the centuries this became shortened to "ma" elsewhere in Thailand, and this now forms the prefix for some 40 plants with edible fruit or leaves — including such well known names as "ma-muang," mango; "ma-lagor," papaya; "maprao," coconut; "ma-keua," egg-plant; "ma-keua-tet," tomato, and "ma-kok," the hog plum, from which came the name "Bang-ma-kok," Hog-plum village, later shortened to "Bangkok."

## Songkran in the old days

Some 60 or more years ago, it seems, the Songkran festival was celebrated in much more robust fashion than today, as has been wittily described by M.R. Kukrit Pramoj in some amusing recollections of his childhood days.

In those days, strictly speaking there was no New Year celebration as such. The official New Year's Day, on which the year changed from, say, B.E. (Buddhist Era) 2462 (AD 1919) to B.E. 2463, was April 1; but that day was not celebrated. All celebrations took place on "Wan Trut," which means "the day for saying goodbye to the old year", and on Songkran Day, which marks the welcoming of the new year.

Songkran falls in the middle of the fifth lunar month (that is, in April) when the Sun is in Aries; but Trut comes at the end of the fourth (or beginning of the fifth) month. So there are several days in between.

But as far as the people were concerned, they didn't pay too much attention to these technicalities. The entire period was simply regarded as an occasion for stopping work, merry-making, being more kind than usual to one's fellow creatures, and generally having a good time. "Sanuk", that wonderful Thai word for which "enjoyment" is just a pale echo, was the key idea.

The Trut period always began with a great deal of "tam boon" or merit-making. Everyone in every home went to the local temple to offer food to the monks. This was done on a truly lavish scale — not just ordinary trayfuls of food, but complete "hahps" (pairs of large baskets slung from shoulder-poles such as street vendors use), one pair of baskets filled with the main course plus rice, and another pair with dessert. M.R. Kukrit remembers walking to the "sala parien" or sermon hall at the temple along a path made sopping wet and slippery by food spilt out from the

baskets.

In those days a typical large compound would have a lot of servants, all with families and hordes of children. Another big feature was the flinging of coins from a "kan" or bathing-bowl from an upstairs window down into the compound. In even earlier times the coins used to be put inside limes (rather as the traditional threepenny piece was put inside the English Christmas pudding), but this custom had been abandoned as a waste of time (and lime?). The coins flung down were the "ath" (one-sixty-fourth of a baht), the "los", one-satang, five-satang and 10-satang pieces. A "saleung" or 25-satang piece was considered too valuable to give away.

Scrambling and fighting for the coins was all part of the "sanuk". The younger children spent all their time dashing from house to house to capture the scattered coins, enjoying themselves so much that they never noticed the bruises and scratches they accumulated from being almost trampled underfoot by the older ones.

The favourite way of spending the few days' holiday between "Wan Trut" (the end of the old year) and Songkran (the start of the new) was gambling. In even earlier days there had been many different games of chance, but the Government had stopped all of them except cards, and even for these a permit was needed.

So at Trut-time there were card games in practically every household. Everyone was dragged into the game and in each house there would be several games going on at once, with perhaps seven or eight players in each game. The games lasted not for hours but for days on end — anything from three to five days and nights non-stop.

This form of "sanuk" was taken very seriously indeed. Players took only the briefest time off to eat, sleep, or go to the rest-room, and even then they'd ask a friend to sit in for them at the game. No one took a bath — it wasted too much valuable time! Most people just called for a bowl of water to wash their faces.

Although there was plenty of liquor circulating, there was hardly ever any trouble with drunkenness because everyone was so intent on the game. There was lots of food, too —

more than enough for all the players, spectators, and children who were forever hanging around waiting for the chance of a “hand-out” or gift from winning players. There was usually a light meal in the afternoon, followed by rice soup late at night.

The householder in whose home the games took place collected a small percentage of the winnings to help pay for all this food, but such “levies” were usually very small because the whole idea was for the householder to offer hospitality to his friends.

Card-playing in those days wasn't just for the purpose of winning money, but was a genuine social occasion. There was a good deal of chit-chat, banter and raucous laughter — it was a really happy time, especially for the children, who were allowed to stay up as late as they liked without being chased off to bed.

The cards, by the way, were the long narrow packs of 120 cards used in Thailand's most popular card game, “pai tong”. This is not unlike whist or rummy, with the winner being the player holding the highest number of “tong” or tricks of three cards.

The card games provided a rare and subtle way for a young man to win a young lady's heart. He would carefully arrange things so that he was sitting in such a position that he had to play his own card immediately before the girl played hers; for what could endear him more to her than when he placed the winning card ready for her to play!

Besides card games, people upcountry played many other games in the evening at Songkran-time, and often well into the night, by which time the games usually turned into singing and dancing.

When trying to visualise those bygone festival-times, an important thing to remember is that there was no electricity! Not only did this mean there were no lights; there were also no neon signs — and no microphones or loudspeakers! Whatever took place in the way of communal games and dancing had to be within the small circle of light cast by a lamp or bonfire, and within earshot of the singing.

In the old days people hadn't yet recovered from the effects of “Trut” by the time Songkran began. During

Songkran the merit-making which had begun during “Trut” continued, but on a somewhat smaller scale, with the releasing of birds and fish, as is done today.

In those days, curiously enough, there was no water-throwing, with which Songkran is associated in most people’s minds today. This was a Burmese tradition which had originally come from India, where red powder was thrown. From Burma the water-throwing custom reached Chiang Mai, but at that time there was no rail connection between Chiang Mai and Bangkok, and therefore little communication between the two cities. So Bangkok folk had little or no contact with those of Chiang Mai and their customs — hence water-throwing was unknown in Bangkok.

However, young people used to take a “panung” and a shawl and some perfumed water, and visit respected elders over the age of 60. Having entered the elders’ house and performed the graceful and respectful prostration still known as the “grahp”, they poured the perfumed water over the elders’ hands and then presented the two pieces of cloth. The elders then blessed the young visitors.

The general feeling seemed to be that “Trut”, being the end of the old year, meant the casting away of everything — especially one’s inhibitions! So the public mood was very free and easy. Songkran, on the other hand, was the start of a new year, and when one starts something, one must be less carefree. (It all sounds rather like New Year resolutions in the West, doesn’t it? And some of those last longer than others...)

As is still done by many people today, the first duty at Songkran-time in those days was the annual spring-cleaning of one’s house. The idea was to start the new year with a clean slate. Songkran was also a special time for making merit on behalf of one’s ancestors. If the ancestral ashes were kept at home, they would be brought out for the ceremony of “rot nam Songkran” or pouring the Songkran water.

This included pouring water over the tip of one’s finger into a bowl as is done today after a Buddhist religious ceremony, while making a wish or reciting a special prayer. The water in the bowl was later poured onto the ground (as it still is) near

the base of a large tree.

Families whose ancestors' relics were kept inside a chedi or pagoda at a temple would make merit at that temple, and would take the opportunity at the same time to clean up and repair the chedi. This was also part of the Songkran "spring-cleaning" tradition.

On Songkran Day, monks would be invited to one's house in the evening to "suat mon" or chant mantras as they still do today. (The Thai word "mon" comes from the Sanskrit "mantra"). In the morning, writes M.R. Kukrit, we would offer food to the monks and then give them new robes, also on behalf of our ancestors. In some households everything was done on the same day — chanting, offering food for the 11 a.m. meal followed by the giving of the robes.

The robe-giving was a way of repaying our ancestors for all they had done for us. Merit-making on behalf of the dead was supposed to bring "siri mongkol" or good fortune to the house for the whole year, because at the same time the monks would sprinkle holy water on the house and everyone in it.

In those far-off days there was a well known but strange phenomenon every year at Songkran-time. This was the mysterious appearance of a certain kind of creature, known for want of a better name as "the Songkran creature".

They were in fact a kind of worm, and appeared in hundreds of thousands in rivers and klongs throughout the Kingdom. They were about the size of "khanom jeen" — the thin white noodles made of boiled rice flour which are such a common feature of Thai cuisine.

The only thing was, they weren't white; they were all the colours of the rainbow. The huge shoals consisted of individual worms in a great variety of bright colours — yellow, red, green, blue, purple and so on. Incessantly wriggling, the heaving mass of "Songkran creatures" produced a vibrating spectrum of colour not unlike the effect of a Van Gogh painting.

But the strange and inexplicable fact was that if you took them out of the river or klong and put them in a bucket of water, the brilliant colours immediately vanished and they looked like perfectly ordinary black worms.



At night during the Songkran period there was also a regular and terrifying occurrence — the intermittent firing of deafeningly loud cannon. This was known as “ying peun atana”. M.R. Kukrit wryly remarks that it was not unlike the late-night horror movies shown on television today.

The cannon-firing was connected with the special Songkran prayer meetings which used to be held in the Grand Palace. The chanting began in the evening and went on all night. The purpose of the prayer meetings was to bless the Thai Kingdom and bring happiness and prosperity to the whole country. The prayers, or more correctly chants, recalled the merits of the Buddha and called on the Lords of the Four Worlds to confer happiness and prosperity on the nation.

After the monks had finished chanting, several cannon were fired simultaneously, each one several times. They made a really fearful din. It might not have been so bad during the daytime — but, like all loud noises, they sounded a great deal louder at night!

Most people believed the cannon were fired for the purpose of driving ghosts out of the city, which at that time was clustered in the area around the Grand Palace. On the nights when the monks chanted, many people became very scared of ghosts, believing the latter would be disturbed by the cannon and by the chanting, and would therefore be dashing about all over the place. Children and, indeed, anyone with weak nerves, would pull their blankets over their heads and quake with fear every time the cannon went off. (Perhaps you get the same feeling whenever a loud thunderclap directly overhead sets all the cutlery and glassware in the house jangling, as well as your nerves; I certainly do!)

Ghosts include the spirits of one's own ancestors — and, during the cannon-firing, most people were particularly worried about the welfare of such spirits. They were afraid their late loved ones might injure themselves while running away from the noise of the cannon. So people built special kinds of first-aid stations beforehand in the compounds of their houses, at particular spots where it was believed the ancestral spirits might pass by.



The first-aid stations took the form of a branch usually cut from a “dton makahm” or tamarind tree. The branch was stuck in a plant-pot or sometimes directly in the ground. M.R. Kukrit describes how they used to tie “khao pohk”, cones made from banana leaves filled with cooked white rice, and small bamboo containers filled with water, on the branches. On the plant-pot or on the ground, they placed banana leaves containing “kap khao” — the various Thai dishes normally eaten with rice — and dessert. So when the spirits of their ancestors arrived, tired after running away from those dreadful cannon, they would stop, eat, drink and rest awhile until they had regained enough strength to rush off again the next time the cannon roared.

Some turmeric and red lime paste (the kind chewed with betel) was also left so that, when the spirits arrived with elbows and knees bleeding from stumbling and falling over in the dark, they could treat their own wounds with the mixture. Strips of cloth were also hung on the branches for the spirits to use as bandages.

...Just think, muses M.R. Kukrit, summing up these recollections of his childhood Songkrans — how kind-hearted the old-time Thais used to be! They were really lovable. Having been born a Thai, he adds, and having lived in Thailand and loved his country for 65 years (that was written a few years ago) he knows that even after he dies people will still worry about his welfare.

## How dates are reckoned

I'd been trying to find out the answers to two questions:

(1) Why does the FIRST lunar month (“*deuan ai*” in Thai) start in DECEMBER, and not in APRIL, which is the start of the old Thai new year? (April 1 was the official start, but I believe in even earlier times the New Year began around the middle of the month — not always on April 13 which is Songkran Day, but round about that date; the astrological “*jor sor*” years still do so today).

(2) Why did upcountry Thai folk as recently as 30 years ago (and maybe even today) reckon dates by “*wan phra*” (Buddhist holy days) which follow the phases of the moon, when there was (and of course still is) a perfectly good seven-day week dating back to the Buddha's time and probably before?

For the benefit of non-astrologers, let me explain a bit more. The first question doesn't need much explaining, really; it's simply that I've always thought it strange that the old Thai new year should start in the FIFTH lunar month, and not, as might be expected, with the FIRST lunar month!

The second question comes from what my wife has told me about her own childhood upcountry where she was brought up by her grandmother.

In those days neither she nor her grandmother nor anyone else paid any attention to the ordinary days of the week — Sunday, Monday and so on. Every day was reckoned by the phases of the moon; days were known as “the 10th day of the waxing moon of the second (lunar) month,” “the third day of the waning moon of the seventh month,” and so on. (And if the year was mentioned, it was according to the 12-year cycle — the Year of the Tiger, Horse, Goat or whatever).

A child's birth was written down in this way and it was then converted to the day of the week, date of the calendar month, and year of the Buddhist Era (equal to AD plus 543). This was done presumably so that the birth could be registered at the amphoe office.

The even-numbered lunar months have 30 days — 15 days of the waxing moon, the 15th day being full moon, followed by 15 days of waning moon; the odd-numbered months have 29 days, with only 14 days' waning moon. The Buddhist "wan phra" or holy days fall on the eighth and 15th waxing-moon days of every month, and on the eighth and 15th or 14th days of the waning moon depending on whether the month is even or odd.

My wife says that every "wan phra" was a school holiday, and there were also occasional holidays on the day before "wan phra", known as "wan goan" because it's the day on which monks shave their heads afresh. — (She can't remember which "wan goan" were school holidays and which weren't).

So in upcountry Thailand life revolved round the phases of the moon because it was geared to the tempo of the "wan phra" days on which merit was made. And in parts of Thailand, as I said, I think this is still true today.

The day of the full moon, "wan phen" in Thai, is a special day on which fall important festivals, Buddhist and secular. In the third month (February) there's Makha Bucha, commemorating the day on which 1,250 disciples independently and miraculously visited the Lord Buddha. In the sixth month (May), Visakha Bucha or Wesak is the day on which the Buddha was born, attained Enlightenment, and died. Assalha Bucha in the eighth month (July), on which he preached his First Discourse in the deer park at Varanasi (Banares), which is also the day before "wan khao phansa," the first day of the Buddhist Lent. "Wan ork phansa" or the end of Lent, in the 11th month (October); and Loy Krathong, the predominantly Brahmin festival of lights and water in the 12th month (November).

And yet... There remain those seven days of the week, which seem to have been used since the earliest times and which bear absolutely no relation to "wan phra" or the

phases of the moon...

These days of the week were known not only to the ancients in more western parts of the world but also since very early times in Thailand.

At least three separate phenomena show this: The wearing of "colours of the day" — red for Sunday, cream for Monday, pink for Tuesday and so on — by former Thai kings and other commanders-in-chief when going into battle; and the even earlier association of the days of the week with Buddhism evidenced by traditional styles and attitudes in Buddha statues dating from very early times and assigned to specific days of the week.

Sunday's attitude is known as "tawai netr" ("give eyes"); Monday's, "hahm samut" ("forbid the ocean"); Tuesday's, "saiyat" ("reclining). The latter is possibly because an ancient Pali text states that the Budha died and attained Parinibbana or Nirvana on a Tuesday. For Wednesday, "oombaht" ("holding the bowl"); for Thursday, "nang samathi" ("sitting in meditation"); Friday, "rampeung" ("pondering"); and Saturday, "nahk prok" ("with a naga or seven-headed serpent over his head").

But I said THREE separate phenomena, didn't I? The third one is a simple Thai word, "sapdah". It means "a week," and it comes from the Sanskrit "saptar" meaning seven. ("Saptar" came from the same Indo-European root as the Latin "septem" and the English "seven").

Then I received a telephone call from my friend M.R. Ayumongol Sonakul, who pointed out what I should have realised: Songkran or the ancient New Year has to do with the SUN, not the Moon; it marks the transition of the Sun from the Zodiac Sign of Aries into that of Taurus ("Rasi Meen" to "Rasi Mayt" in Thai).

The lunar months are concerned with the MOON, of course — they have nothing whatever to do with the Sun.

Now I shall describe the connection between the names of the days of the week in Thai, English and other European languages. I've made a table, which shows several interesting things. The direct derivation of the Thai names from the Sanskrit is very obvious, with the possible exception of Saturday. In Latin, Sunday has become the Christian

“Lord’s Day,” while the modern Italian, Spanish and French names for Sunday are in turn derived from the Latin; but in English the name has kept to that of the Sun.

The English name “Saturday” comes directly from the Roman god Saturn, after which the planet Saturn was also named. But the German, French, Italian and Spanish names for Saturday come from the Latin “Sabbatum,” which came via Greek from the Hebrew “Shabbat”, the ancient Jewish Sabbath Day which is still the weekly rest-day in Israel.

Monday is “Moon Day” in all the languages shown in the table.

The names of the other four days in the “Latin” languages come from the Roman gods Mars, Mercury, Jupiter and Venus; names also given to the five planets (including Saturn) known to mankind since Babylonian (or Ban Chieng) times. Mars was the god of war; Mercury, the god of eloquence and commerce (a good salesman, evidently!); Jupiter, king of the gods; Venus, goddess of love; and Saturn, the god of agriculture.

And so to the most important point of all. The THAI names for all seven days of the week are also the Thai names for the Sun, Moon and the *same* Planets, day for day, as the WESTERN ones.

Why?

For the answer, we must go back to the earliest civilisations. To the ancients, the Sun, Moon and five known Planets WERE gods.

Says the Encyclopaedia Britannica, “When one gazes at the planet Mars glowing in the sky like a red danger signal, it is easy to understand why the ancient people identified this object with the god of war — the Romans with Mars, the Greeks with Ares.”

And, the writer might have added, the people of ancient India with the Sanskrit Mangal.

For thousands of years, then, the Sun, Moon and these five Planets have been associated with the same set of gods.

The NAMES of these planet-gods changed from culture to culture, from language to language; Mercury, for instance, was Hermes to the Greeks.

The early people known as Aryans or Indo-Europeans split into two broad groups, one group migrating westward to form the civilisations of ancient Greece and Rome, while the other moved eastward to the Indian subcontinent. Each group evolved their own names for the same planet-gods. But ancient cultural interchange between East and West, especially through Indian astrology, ensured that no matter what names they were given, the Sun, Moon and five planet-gods remained attached to the same days of the week in both East and West. And that's why the Thai names for the days of the week are also those of the Sun, Moon and the same five planet-gods as in the West.

The Thai word for Friday incidentally, is "wan sook." The "sook" has the same sound as the Thai word for "happiness" (though it's spelt differently). So, for Thai people, Friday is the day of happiness...

And most Westerners, too, feel happy on Friday... It'll soon be the weekend!

P.S. Ayumongkol followed up his phone call with a letter: "There seem to have been two rival calendars going, rather like a House of Representatives and a Senate, from time immemorial.

"The moon is of course easy to watch, because it gets pregnant and aborts itself with the regularity of the 8 p.m. TV restarting time.

"The sun, on the other hand, fools us by going up and down each day but does funny things behind our back throughout the 365-day cycle.

"The funny thing the sun does is to arrange the seasons, which even the most moonmad farmer must have noticed, since he was after all trying to plant his crops for a living as well as study moon and mythology.

"The astrologers also had to depend on the sun. So in fact we have really held two different calendars simultaneously.

"On moon calendars, Siam Rath and a few dailies still publish the lunar date on their back page every day. All the dailies used to, but some seem to have dropped it, which is a pity because it was something of a tradition with the Thai-language papers."

DAY	THAI NAME	SANSKRIT	LITERAL TRANSLATION OF THAI AND SANSKRIT	LATE LATIN	MODERN ITALIAN	MODERN SPANISH	MODERN FRENCH
Sunday	Wan athit	Aditya war	Sun Day	Dominicus Dies (Lord's Day) or Solis Dies	Domenica	Domingo	Dimanche
Monday	Wan jan	Chandra war	Moon Day	Lunae Dies	Lunedì	Lunes	Lundi
Tuesday	Wan angkaan	Mangal war	Mars Day	Martis Dies	Martedì	Martes	Mardi
Wednesday	Wan put	Budh war	Mercury Day	Mercurii Dies	Mercoledì	Miercoles	Mercredi
Thursday	Wan pareuhat	Vrihaspati war	Jupiter Day	Jovis Dies	Giovedì	Jueves	Jeudi
Friday	Wan sook	Shukra war	Venus Day	Veneris Dies	Venerdì	Viernes	Vendredi
Saturday	Wan sao	Shani war	Saturn Day	Saturni Dies	Sabbato	Sabado	Samedi



## Taxi!

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*NOTE: What follows was written in 1980. All prices have gone up considerably since then.*

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Since last November, I've been going home from the office by taxi every day. And from that time on, I've taken a greater interest than before in those colourful characters, Bangkok's taxi-drivers, and their often equally interesting vehicles.

In my early days in Bangkok, from 1965 to about 1967, one could go almost anywhere by taxi for five baht. An exceptionally long journey, such as from Sukhumvit to the Sunday Market, might cost an outrageously expensive 10 baht. In those days I was fond of walking the streets of Bangkok for pleasure and exercise (fonder than I am now); and my main memories are of trying to ignore the insistent hooting of passing taxis, whose drivers felt certain that as a helpless foreigner I needed immediate conveyance to my hotel — in their vehicle, of course, and for the usual five baht.

Then taxi fares, like everything else, started edging upwards. In 1968 I remember feeling disgusted at being charged SEVEN baht from Soi Rangnam (near the Victory Monument) to the Montien Hotel — a journey which today would probably cost at least 30 baht.

Until a few years ago, in fact, I was never a habitual taxi-goer. I always felt they were an unnecessary extravagance; fancy having to pay five or even 15 baht, when one could travel comfortably by bus for 50 satang and see all kinds of interesting people (and if you're thinking "he means pretty girls," well, everyone's entitled to his own opinion, aren't

they?).

When I did go by taxi I invariably travelled in front next to the driver — and I still do. This is mainly for reasons of comfort; it's usually cooler in front, especially if the afternoon sun is pouring in through the rear window. And one doesn't get flung about so much by the often flamboyant (but quite safe) driving styles of Bangkok taxi-drivers.

Early on, I discovered what many foreign readers have probably found too: If you can speak just a couple of words of Thai (such as "sib baht") most taxi drivers take it for granted that you can speak and understand the language like a native!

I remember one particular "conversation" in a taxi about 10 years ago — actually, like so many other "conversations" in taxis since then, it was much more of a monologue. As usual, the driver had assumed I understood Thai perfectly; in fact I understood just about enough to know that he was talking about life under Thailand's former Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat. Whatever the driver was telling me was evidently terribly funny, for he was roaring with laughter the whole time, so much so that we nearly overshot several sets of red lights. What could I do but laugh too and utter the occasional "ooh!" or "ha, ha!"?

I've often wished since then that I could have understood that "conversation"; I'm sure it must have been very funny.

Anyway, for the past six months or so I've been going home by taxi pretty well every day, five days a week, and I think some of my experiences and observations may be worth setting down on paper.

My main impression is that Bangkok taxi-drivers are on the whole a pleasant, cheerful and polite lot. Like any other group of people, of course, they vary considerably — from the extremely morose and silent (well, that suits me too; I'm often grateful for the silence) to the excessively verbose. But by and large the average driver seems a pretty happy, contented sort of man. This assessment may seem a bit on the rosy side to some taxi-goers, but I'll stick by it.

Making the same journey day after day over a longish period has given me some idea of its correct market value — and also, of how to avoid bargaining, which I hate because it

means standing longer than necessary in the hot sun — and perhaps losing one's cool in other ways too! The trick is to announce your destination clearly and LOUDLY (to overcome the traffic noise) and then IMMEDIATELY, without pausing, state the fare you propose to pay. (If you pause even for a fraction of a second, the driver will probably state his own estimate, which may well be higher than yours).

Thus, in my own case. I shout the same words every day: "Bpai Soi Paidee Madee — Sahm-sib!" — literally, "Go Soi Paidee Madee — 30!" It has to be done quickly these days, because of the bus lanes; notice that I don't waste time saying "baht"! Either the driver agrees immediately (he usually does) or he may occasionally ask for 35 or 40. As I've already resigned myself to paying 40 if I must, I immediately agree and hop in. There's no arguing; there's no time, because the whole thing has to be done under the watchful eye of a traffic policeman. It's all quite legal; there's a shiny new blue "taxi pick-up station" sign close by, but nonetheless at the time of writing, most taxi-drivers seem a wee bit nervous about stopping. In fact on a couple of occasions recently, something quite unheard of since the old five-baht days has happened: The driver has stopped when I signalled him, opened the door, motioned me to jump in — and started driving again, BEFORE asking me either my destination or my proposed payment. (In each case he has immediately agreed to my 30-baht figure).

A few months ago, a strange trend in taxi fares appeared: They went UP, then went DOWN again. I think it was just after the last-but-one (or last-but-two?) round of oil price increases. Petrol had gone up, and the slightly aggrieved taximen decided that their fares must go up too. That's when my daily fare home went up from 30 to 40 baht. But the public apparently wasn't ready for it; it seemed that the taximen had priced themselves out of the market. The travelling public started turning back to the buses, and empty taxis became a commoner sight on the street. So, true to the law of supply and demand, down came the fares again...

The way I discovered this fact was unusual and rather amusing; it's connected with the importance of using the

correct tone when speaking Thai.

On this particular occasion I had stopped a taxi as usual just after five p.m., and said “Bpai Soi Paidee Madee — see-sib baht!” (“Go Soi Paidee Madee — 40 baht!”)

The driver was elderly and a bit deaf; the traffic was very noisy; and without realising it, I had done what I’m always cautioning readers not to do: *I had used the wrong tone*. Instead of saying “seesib” in a *low* tone, I’d said “SEE-sib” in a *falling* tone, and the driver mistook it for “YEE-sib”, which means 20! “Kor yee-sib hah!” (Please make it 25!) he answered... To my shame, I said nothing; I just nodded, and off we went. That was when I first realised that fares had indeed come down...

More recently, the same thing happened again; I said what I intended to be “see-sib” (40), but got the tone wrong again; the driver shook his head and said “sahm-sib” (30)! This time I was a bit more honest: I hesitated. Taking his cue, the driver asked me what I’d said. Bravely I confessed to having said 40 — to which he smilingly agreed! Ah, well.

As I mentioned just now, the moment some taxi-drivers find you can speak two words of Thai, they automatically assume you have total comprehension and total vocabulary; they treat you just like a fellow-Thai, in fact.

There’s an almost standard pattern for the conversation that follows as we drive on our way. *DRIVER*: “Yoo meuang Thai ghee bpee khrap?” (“How many years have you been in Thailand?”) *ME*: “Sib-see bpee.” (14 years). *DRIVER*: “O-o-o-oh!” (A long-drawn-out, congratulatory sound, almost a cheer, followed by a gentle laugh). Then comes the classic phrase known to so many “farangs”: “Poot Thai geng mahk!” (“You speak Thai very well!”) *ME*: “Mai chai!” (“Not so!”) followed by a vague deprecatory sound. Next comes a string of questions which I now know by heart, even if I can’t understand the driver because he speaks with the almost totally unintelligible accent of the Northeast: Do I have a Thai wife? Yes, I do. Another round of applause. How old is she? (an optional extra). 40. Oh. Any children? No. Oh! (Extreme disappointment, in some cases even a hint of disapproval). Pause. Why not? Because we’re too old; I’m

65, my wife is 40. Hey, THAT's not old! (One driver even told me we ought to have at least one child, if only for the sake of "anussorn". I looked up "anussorn" in the dictionary when I got home; it means "remembrance". A child to remember me by after I'm gone, perhaps?)

Next question (also optional, depending on the driver's inhibitions or lack of them): How much do I earn?

And so on. (Why don't they ask me what size socks I wear, I wonder?) The conversation gradually peters out as it becomes increasingly apparent that my Thai just isn't nearly as good as the driver thought it was.

But recently, and I admit it's been for the sake of this column, I've started turning the tables and asking the drivers about *their* lives and earnings. As I said, I've found most Bangkok taxi-drivers a pleasant and cheerful lot. And this, besides being a natural trait of most Thais, may also be partly due to the fact that taxi-drivers don't seem to be doing too badly — judging from the few I've asked, anyway. The profit margin isn't vast, but it probably puts them way above the poverty line.

Drivers who own their taxis are probably in the minority, but they're obviously better off financially because they don't have to pay the daily rental charge which may vary from 120 to 150 baht. One owner-driver I asked says he makes 500-600 baht a day in fares and spends 100 baht on petrol. So there's a daily profit of 400-500 baht, out of which he must pay registration and licence fees, maintenance and repairs, and so on. He probably nets a monthly total of something over 10,000 baht.

The much more common case of the driver who rents his taxi on a daily basis means a considerably lower net income of 250-350 baht a day. Most drivers have families of three, four or five children to support and educate, and many of them, I suspect, have other regular jobs as well; indeed, one driver told me he had. But by and large, life isn't too bad — a fact which is reflected by many of them in their cheerful grins.

The taxis themselves vary widely in appearance and condition, from the rather sorry-looking vehicles whose doors have to be held shut with a loop of string, to the city's

50 or so smart air-conditioned taxis (which I've ridden in three or four times — they charge five or 10 baht extra per journey, which is very reasonable).

Recently one taxi-driver told me he was a palmist. "So's my wife," I answered, "and an astrologer too." When we reached my home he asked me if I would call my wife out into the soi to read his palm. As soon as I called her she came rushing out with a 10-baht note as usual, thinking I hadn't enough small change to pay the driver. After that the three of us stood just outside the gate, my wife and the taxi-driver chatting away merrily in Thai fortune-tellers' jargon. I couldn't understand a word he was saying to her, and later I asked her if he was from the Northeast. "No," she replied matter-of-factly, "he was drunk!"

I had to point out in all fairness that his driving had been anything but drunk — perfectly sober and safe, in fact; and his conversation in the taxi was fairly intelligible too — not slurred or anything like that. "Well, all I can say is, he *seemed* drunk!" said my wife.

So there we are; Bangkok's taxi-drivers come in all shapes and sizes, from morosely silent to cheerfully extrovert to apparently drunk but perfectly safe fortune-tellers... It takes all sorts to make a taxi-drivers' world.

## Family planning the Thai way

“Kor hy mee look dtem bahn, lahn dtem muang” — “May you fill your house with children and the whole town with your grandchildren.”

That was the old philosophy in Thailand. Throughout the nation's history, many Thais were born and nearly as many died because of wars and epidemics. So the population grew only very slowly; it took 800 years to produce the first million Thais.

This gave rise to a general trend of everyone wanting lots of children. Present-day Thai scholars feel that perhaps the earliest documented evidence of an attempt to promote population growth in Thailand was the famous passage on King Ramkhamhaeng's stone at Sukhothai:

“We Thais are happy; in the fields there is rice, in the water there are fish. Who wants to trade trades . . . and so on. This, it has been remarked, was in its way a kind of tourist promotion message; come and live in Sukhothai, life is good here — come and swell our population!

As recently as the 1940s prizes and honours were awarded on the original Mothers' Day for mothers with large families. But during the latter part of Marshal Sarit's Government in the early 1960s, Thai researchers and economists put forward a new angle: Although Thailand was increasing its modern medical and public health services, the nation's development couldn't keep up with its population growth, largely because medical science had wiped out epidemics.

This trend continued, and compared with the 800 years needed to produce the first million Thais, it now takes only eight months to produce each additional million.

By 1971 the Government had agreed to adopt an official family planning policy. In the 11 years since then, Thai ways



with regard to fertility have changed more drastically than anywhere in the world.

The figures speak for themselves: In 1971, 10 per cent of rural Thai couples of child-bearing age (15 to 44) practised family planning; as of 1982, the figure is 60 per cent — a nearly sixfold increase in 11 years.

And the old saying has given way to a new one. "Kor hy mee look noy noy, proh look mahk ja yahk jon" — "May you have few children, because many children make you poor and make life hard."

Family planning has been adopted as a national policy by many countries in this and other parts of the world, and the methods used to bring the message to the people are pretty much the same from country to country. My reason for dealing with this subject is that some of the methods now being used in Thailand are so unusual, so typically and delightfully Thai, that they can indeed be regarded as purely "Thai ways."

For instance, children in one-third of all Thailand's primary schools now sing a family planning song and promise not to have more than two children when they grow up; the girls promise not to marry before the age of 25, and the boys not before 30. And Buddhist monks bless the contraceptives and support the efforts of government and private-sector organisations in family planning.

At one temple in Lop Buri Province, the abbot has encouraged poor men who can't afford to donate money to his temple, and who feel they already have enough children, to come and have a vasectomy in the temple grounds.

The private-sector association which I'll mention in a minute gives the man the money and he gives it to the abbot, thereby making merit while at the same time preventing his family from growing still larger.

Although the Government is naturally the major source of Thailand's family planning drive, it is the private sector, or rather one particular group of organisations within that sector, that I'm going to write about, because this is where all the colourful "Thai-ness" originates.

This is the Population and Community Development Association, and one of its bureaus is the Community-Based

Family Planning Services. (Another is the Asian Centre for Population and Community Development).

For simplicity, and because this isn't intended as a detailed analysis, I shall refer to this group simply as "the association." I think the message on the association's New Year card (which has a painting of a family with two children offering alms to monks) is worth repeating: "We wish you and your friends great happiness and subdued fertility."

The guiding force behind the association and its unorthodox but highly successful efforts at popularising family planning at grassroots level is 41-year-old Mechai Viravai-dya, an ex-government economist with a flair for public relations and a fine sense of humour.

"We've put a lighthearted element into it," he says, "because the Thais are a light-hearted lot." The main difference between his programme and the Government's is that people have to go to the government family planning centre, whereas he takes his programme direct to the people.

But Mechai and his army of association workers have done more than that; they have taken the awkwardness out of sex education, and substituted a commonsense approach and a spirit of fun. A big breakthrough was when Mechai stood before a solemn group of rural schoolteachers and on the spur of the moment blew up a condom like a balloon for the first time.

The effect was electrifying; suddenly the rather self-conscious-looking audience were all roaring with laughter.

From the earliest days when the association was chastised for doing this, it has now become cheerfully accepted as part of the whole family planning drive. Condom-blowing competitions have become a regular feature at the association's mass meetings with upcountry teachers and villagers. Whoever blows a condom up the biggest (without bursting it, of course) wins a prize.

The spirit behind the association's approach was summed up rather neatly some years ago by the British journal "The Practitioner". It said, "The key to the Thai programme is community-based distribution of contraceptives... It is recognised that (Thai) couples make family planning deci-

sions for a variety of social and economic reasons and only rarely for medical reasons. So they often want to get their contraceptives in the way they buy their vegetables, rather than in the way they get their pneumonia treated."

This of course is fine as far as it goes. But it doesn't mention that vital ingredient needed to get Thailand's rural folk — who make up 80 per cent of its 47 million population — to accept the ideas of voluntary family limitation, the use of contraceptives, and even sterilisation.

This is where Mechai's sound Thai psychology and economic common sense come in the picture. Without this factor, the programme surely would never have achieved the success it has. For Mechai understands the average Thai's pragmatic outlook — and, just as important, his (and her) delicious sense of humour.

Every Thai, no matter how poor, how bitter his or her struggle for existence, never fails to enjoy a good joke. And whether it's Mechai handing a city official or businessman his business card complete with condom attached; one of the association's pretty young workers giving Bangkok's traffic policemen free boxes of condoms on New Year's Day (at the risk of making you wince, I must reveal that this particular activity is called "Cops and Rubbers"); a bunch of balloons (actually condoms) being released into the air with coupons attached entitling the lucky finder to a free sterilisation; a snakes-and-ladders game played on a specially designed "pa-kao-ma" cloth; or a male stud pig with the words "I've been vasectomised" painted on its flank — Mechai's appeal to the Thai sense of humour is somehow always there to give life just that extra touch of fun.

Of course, there's the usual crop of typical "village-idiot" jokes. For instance: At an association village meeting, lecturer demonstrates how to use a condom by placing it on his outstretched thumb; dimwitted farmer returns home, goes to bed with wife, carefully puts condom on his own thumb... Wife gets pregnant.

Or again: Wife receives supply of pills; decides that as it is hubby who has been responsible for her getting pregnant in the past, it is hubby who should take the pill; he does... Wife gets pregnant.

The association's basic principle lies in that phrase in its title — "Community-Based." The people who supply contraceptives to the 200,000 odd families who now use them regularly in all parts of the country, are all local and respected members of the community. The villagers can chat naturally with them as man to man, or woman to woman. What's more, they're on the spot; villagers don't have to travel miles by bus or boat to buy their contraceptives.

A good example of a successful type of distributor is the local women's hairdresser, who comes into contact with women of childbearing age whenever they pop in to have their hair done; and here too the association's "incentive" idea comes into play. "Acceptors," as those who practise family planning are known in the jargon, get 10 per cent discount off their hairdressing fee.

Again, some 400 Bangkok taxi-drivers have been recruited by the association. They sell contraceptives to their passengers, and have even persuaded an average of 10 men a month to have a vasectomy.

I think some details about that game played on the "pa-kao-ma" are worth giving. The association's leaflet explains in English just what a "pa-kao-ma" is:

"Every male Thai owns at least one... Essentially, the 'pa-kao-ma' is a big piece of cotton cloth worn around the waist... It can be used as a loincloth, towel, turban, pillow, sheet, tablecloth, carrying-case, stretcher, hammock, curtains, carpet... Since the 'pa-kao-ma' is a symbol of resourcefulness and ingenuity, its use as a vehicle for family-planning messages is ideal for rural people."

The game, as I said earlier, is played on the "snakes-and-ladders" principle by rolling a dice. Typical squares on the "pa-kao-ma" cloth bear messages such as "Wanting to have many children... Go back to No. 20;" "Mother discusses family planning with village distributor... Advance to No. 39;" "Pregnant at the age of 18... Go back to No. 48;" "Get drunk, forget use condom... Go back to 55A;" "Take children to Health Centre for vaccination and immunisation at the correct age... Advance to No. 68."

That last one has nothing to do with family planning,

really, has it? The association under Mechai's able guidance has realised another all-important fact: Family planning in rural Thailand can only work effectively by being part of something bigger — development of the community as a whole, and in terms of guided self-help at that.

This is why you can find on the current list of the association's activities such varied agricultural projects as rainwater catchment and storage, small industries for food processing, contract growing of pigs and goats (in which the receiving farmer and his wife promise that she won't get pregnant for the duration of the contract), parasite control, biogas and solar energy, integrated farming with multiple-cropping schemes, and plenty of other modern agricultural techniques.

In all of these schemes, the association grants low-interest "non-pregnancy" loans and credit, provides technical assistance and training, health and hygiene services and help with marketing the farmer's produce.

This co-operative approach explains why the association's biggest support, in cash and kind — 65 per cent of it — comes from the Thai people themselves, whether it's in the form of giving a piglet, digging a drain or putting up a rainwater gutter on a village school. And it's what has made Thailand's family planning programme one of the most successful in the world.

The association's key workers, more than 16,000 distributors of contraceptives, also give some simple health care and agricultural advice, in as many villages scattered throughout the country. That's a third of all the villages in Thailand, and these distributors are the men and women who are part of the daily rural scene and whose ordinary jobs bring them into contact with most of the local population. They are on call 24 hours a day for the sale of pills and condoms.

Besides the local women's hairdresser, there's the "mae ka" or female vendor who plies the local waterways in her boat selling such necessities as vegetables, fruit — and "the Pill." Like the other distributors, the "mae ka" carries the association's sign and distinctive logo prominently displayed in the prow of her boat. And selling the month's supply of

pills is as natural and uninhibited as selling the day's vegetables — there's nothing "under-the-counter" about it. Why should there be? This is what Mechai and his co-workers in the association have achieved, in those 16,000 villages at any rate — a real and growing public awareness that family planning is as important to everyone's well-being as the day's vegetables and fruit.

The association supplies contraceptives at cost price to its distributors, each of whom makes one baht profit on the five baht for which he or she sells a month's supply of pills, or on the three baht for a packet of three condoms.

The association is also doing sterling work in persuading rural Thai people to have voluntary sterilisations. Perhaps the most spectacular success has been among the menfolk; the ratio of male to female sterilisations has increased 60 times — from one in 20 to three-to-one over the past 10 years.

A variety of ingenious incentives have been thought up in order to persuade men to have vasectomies. One of the earliest ideas was the slogan "the million-baht vasectomy" — in which the vasectomee (if I may coin a word) receives a free lottery ticket which of course carries a potential first prize of a million baht.

The latest development of this idea is the "educational-scholarship vasectomy" in which vasectomees' names are put into a hat, and the lucky names drawn out receive a scholarship worth 3,000 baht a year for their children. The money for these scholarships comes from richer folk who have been vasectomised by the association and have paid the full price for it — a real example of the rich giving to the poor.

"Vasectomy carnivals" and film shows are also held in upcountry villages, and a surprising amount of persuasive propaganda about the benefits of having a voluntary sterilisation is carried over the radio; about 85 per cent of all rural families in Thailand, it seems, now own a transistor radio.

But perhaps the most appealing idea in persuading men to have vasectomies is the association's "vasectomy tour-bus." This picks up poor but willing rural men from their own



villages, brings them in groups to Bangkok which they've probably never seen, and to the holiest of all places for Thai Buddhists — the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. Those who've never seen the sea are even taken as far as Bangsaen. After their tour, they are given a free vasectomy by the association's trained surgeons.

I've mentioned the teaching of primary school children in the basics of family planning. The association has already trained 320,000 schoolteachers in how to put these ideas across to their classes, and every year during the long summer vacation in April and May many of these teachers are brought to Bangkok for refresher courses and discussions with association members. The association even has its own family-planning alphabet in rhyme, which youngsters enjoy reciting in class.

In the association's contract Pig-growing Programme, a male stud pig is lent free of charge to a family owning one or more sows. The resulting piglet(s) are reared cheaply by the family on domestic scraps, and during the eight or nine months in which they grow to marketable size, the family promises to continue practising family planning. The association helps to market the piglets, and the profit from their sale is split 50-50 between the association and the family.

To date, no contract pig-rearer has become pregnant, and in Mechai's words, "the male stud pig enjoys his work; when the 'took-took' (pick-up truck) comes to collect him from his stall, he hops in immediately and goes cheerfully on his rounds."

The association also rents out its family planning buffaloes at half the normal fee to families too poor to have their own animals and who are practising family planning. Each buffalo bears a slogan on its flank saying "I use Mechai's" — as condoms are now universally known in Thailand.

Another idea of the association is "Family Planning Supermarkets" where contraceptives can be bought, located conveniently at main bus terminals.

One of the association's other bureaus which I haven't yet mentioned is the Asian Centre for Population and Community Development, which provides international training programmes on community-based family planning, health



and development programmes. During 1979 the Centre trained 62 participants from developing countries as far apart as Bangladesh and Kenya, and gave shorter orientation courses to nearly 700 people from 35 countries all over the world.

But as I pointed out, the association has always realised that in Thailand at any rate, a successful family planning programme must be part of something bigger — as indeed the association's name implies.

Besides family planning, its activities in rural Thailand include health, nutrition, sanitation and the provision of medical information, as well as help in a wide range of agricultural projects. The "Family Planning Pig" service typifies this approach to making family planning real and relevant to the Thai villagers' life.

In its own words, the association has "supported the creative endeavours of its volunteers to use family planning as a spearhead for other community development activities... These services...are rewards for fertility management and opportunities for greater self-help and self-sustaining development."

Since the Thai Government introduced family planning in 1970, the birth-rate has dropped from 3.3 to 1.8 and is still falling. In four years' time it should be only 1.5. Judging from these figures, the "rewards for fertility management" have proved very successful indeed — and will surely continue to do so.

## Magic from the mouth of the pot

Many people seem to assume that because I write this weekly column, I'm an expert on anything and everything Thai. Well, I'm not. In fact hardly a day goes by without one or other of my Thai friends saying "WHAT? Do you mean to say you've never heard of THAT?" (Whatever "that" is.) And I'm forced to admit that no, I've never heard of it.

I was once at a small farewell party for some visitors from a nearby Asian country, at which a charming young lady in a yellow classical Thai costume with orchid petals in her hair was demonstrating her Thai culinary magic. Water was boiling in two metal pots on twin gas burners in front of her. I asked a Thai friend the name of the little delicacies she was preparing so deftly.

"WHAT?" he said. "Do you mean to say you've never seen 'khao kriab pak mor' being made before?" Feeling a bit foolish, I admitted that I hadn't.

Of course I know what "khao kriab" are. They're those delicious pale-pink, crispy shrimp-flavoured things which I munch at parties until I'm so full I can't eat the buffet dinner. But these were quite different.

Let's take a look in the dictionary. "KHAO KRIAB: thin slices of rice flour crisped over an open fire, there being several varieties..." which are then described — but there's no mention of "khao kriab pak mor." "Pak mor" means "mouth of the pot," and these dainties were neither crisp nor prepared over an open fire.

Briefly, the operation was as follows. The young lady scooped out a ladleful of liquid rice-flour paste (a suspension of fine rice-flour particles in water) from a large bowl, and spread it out thinly on the cotton muslin stretched across the top of the right-hand pot.

She then removed a conical metal cap from the left-hand pot and placed it over the right-hand pot, rather like a conjuror about to produce a rabbit.

After completing her magic on the left-hand pot (as I'll describe in a moment for the right-hand pot) she removed the conical cap and replaced it on the left-hand pot. And, hey presto! What had been liquid was now semi-solid — a transparent, wafer-thin pancake on the stretched muslin.

The young lady put a dab of filling in the centre of this "pancake" — a mixture of minced pork, sugar and peanuts — and then took a flat wooden spatula with which, in the lightest and most delicate fashion, she scraped up the thin, fragile "pancake" and folded it over the filling. She then placed the completed morsel on a tray with the ones she'd already made.

And so it went on, alternating from the left-hand to the right-hand pot and back.

(A Thai friend tells me this process is usually done with earthenware pots, and the conical cap is made not of metal but of "bai toey" or screwpine leaves.)

Now, many years ago I graduated in Physics from London University. So I ought to be able to explain just why that film of liquid becomes solid, oughtn't I?

I asked various people, all of whom seemed to take the process for granted — as did the smiling young lady magician herself. "It's the heat," was the usual answer.

But... Surely the steam inside the airtight conical cap would build up pressure, which would tend to PREVENT the water in the rice-flour paste from evaporating?

Could it be that the muslin was acting as a filter, and the water was escaping downwards into the pot, allowing the heat to coagulate (or bake?) the powder into a solid film? "Yes, that's right," said someone else to whom I put this suggestion.

I suspect it's really a combination of both processes — evaporation and filtration. (If any technically-minded readers are wondering how on earth I ever got that Physics degree, the answer is "No comment".) As I write this, another Thai friend tells me "It's just the same as poaching an egg."

But looking more closely, I saw that the cotton muslin

stretched over both pots had a hole in it. At first I thought this was just due to wear and tear, but I now believe these holes play some mysterious fundamental part in the solidifying process.

Anyway, I was invited to have a try at scraping up the flimsy "pancake" with the wooden spatula. It was extremely difficult, and my hamfisted attempts caused much uncalled-for mirth...

As I took my hand away, my forefinger accidentally passed just above the hole in the muslin, and was struck by an invisible jet of steam. At first I thought I'd received a second-degree burn; but the pain soon wore off, and I remained there gawking at the young lady's practised magic, and wondering how it worked...

## Cloth design and weaving in Northeast Thailand

I have very kindly been given permission to make use of a fascinating little book which came into my hands a few years ago, called "Esarn cloth design." The author is a young lady named Vimolphan Peetathawatchai, herself a native of a village in the Northeast. The text has been ably translated into English by Mom Rachawongse Putrie Viravaidya, and the book, partly in Thai and partly in English, was published in 1973 by the Faculty of Education of Khon Kaen University, with financial support from the Ford Foundation. To all of them I would like to say "thank you" for this opportunity of giving readers a glimpse of life in the Northeast, even if only at second hand. The book is dedicated to her late Serene Highness Princess Vibhavadi Rangsit.

In her preface the author states: "...I feel elated because I have done something worthy of being born in the Northeast ... I am used to the rural life with its dependence on nature... I have never forgotten the rice paddies at sunset, the boys with their buffaloes, the soft lullabies from distant huts, the fishermen, the women at their looms, and the porches filled with youngsters surrounding their elders telling their fascinating folk tales under the light of the full moon..."

In the Northeast, weaving is traditionally considered a woman's task, and the village women use their free time after the rice harvesting to weave cloth for household use or for presentation to monks at various Buddhist temple ceremonies. The designs of the cloth for household use are based on patterns found in nature, and the exquisite handiwork is seen in such everyday articles as pillows (of the rather hard, square shape typical of the region), mosquito

nets, blankets, pasins (women's ankle-length skirts), pa-kao-ma (men's loincloths) and pa-sarongs (men's ankle-length skirts.)

Silkworm breeding and cotton planting begin in May or June, and after the rice has been harvested in January a traditional ceremony called "Long Kuang" is held to usher in the weaving season. This ceremony is usually held on a full-moon night, when villagers gather to spin cotton into yarn. During the afternoon of the auspicious day young girls gather fuel and after the evening meal they assemble near a tree or in the compound of a house to build a bonfire. In some villages the bonfire is made on a mound of earth in the middle of a special wooden platform one or two feet high.

Sitting around the bonfire the village women spin, spin, spin... Stopping every now and then to chat, warm themselves (yes, it's cold in the Northeast in winter) and eat roasted tamarind pips. Meanwhile the young men take the opportunity to "len sao" or court the unattached girls or the girl of their choice. The courting dialogue is in picturesque rhythmic prose, producing a pleasing effect on the listener. In English, the dialogue goes something like this:

YOUNG MAN: I would like to ask you about the fish, about the fields, about the rice. I would like to ask you whether you already have a husband or perhaps a lover?

GIRL: My answer is that I am as pure and fresh as a newly cloven banana leaf. Ever since I grew up I have never had a suitor to court me and I may be compared to a young sapling free from encircling vines. But I wonder whether you have entanglements like a tree entwined by vines.

YOUNG MAN: If your answer is that you have no suitor, then it is our great fortune, for I would like nothing better than to have you as my loving wife, to be by my side.

GIRL: I have always spoken the truth and never been a coquette. In all sincerity, I have never tried to deceive anyone.

There is also a lullaby sung by widows to send their children to sleep so that they can attend the spinning ceremony. The words seem to indicate that folk in the Northeast are pretty much the same as other humans the world over:

*Sleep, my child, while I sing to you.*

*Sleep in this cradle while I rock you.*

*I will go and spin yarn under the full moon and talk with the young men.*

*I will find you a step-father to care for you until you are fully grown.*

*Your uncles and aunts, your father's relatives, have deserted us.*

*Although we are neighbours, we are ignored.*

*They eat "pla beuk" (a nearly extinct Mekong River fish) the size of a ship's stern,*

*but not a morsel will they share.*

*They eat "pla seu" (a fish with stripes like a tiger) the size of an elephant's head,*

*but not a morsel will they give.*

*All we receive are the tiny "pla khao" (white fish) which the villagers give as alms.*

*The sky is lonely and vast with the stars and moon.*

*Oh, who will cut grass to thatch the roof so you will live to care for me when I am old?*

The Northeasterners plant cotton in May or June, and by November the bolls of the common type known as "fai noi" are ripe for picking. While the bolls are left to wither on the plants, the cotton is dried in the sun for four or five days and then ginned in a "heeb fai" or roller gin to separate the cotton from the seed, a process called "eew." The tangled cotton fibres are then put into a "gradong," a round flat shallow winnowing basket woven from strips of bamboo, for carding. This is done with a device rather like a hunting bow; the bow-string is plucked rapidly to make it vibrate sharply against the mass of cotton so as to fluff up the fibres. The cotton is then rolled round a wooden dowel, resulting in long, cigarette-like tufts to be spun into yarn.

Spinning is done by placing one of these long tufts on the spindle and turning the hand wheel to rotate the spindle and the attached cotton. The fingers of the free hand are used to pluck and pull a few fibres from the revolving mass. The quick rotation of the spindle twists the fibres and picks up other fibres to form a continuous thread of yarn, which is



then taken off the spindle and put onto a "bpia" or stick with capped ends, about a yard long, before dyeing the yarn. After dyeing, the yarn is wound round a "gwag" or one-foot-long takraw-shaped rattan spool and then wound onto bobbins.

For the dyeing of both cotton and silk, the Northeasterners have traditionally used natural dyes derived from roots, berries, insects and the soil. The lac insect gives a reddish colour, the indigo plant provides blue; black comes from the "grajai" berry, yellow from the "talaeng" root, and green is made by dipping cloth already dyed in indigo into a "talaeng" solution.

The lac insect, its droppings and nest are collectively known as "kee krang." This is a popular source of dye as the insect colonies are very plentiful in the Northeast. The "kee krang" is dried in the sun and ground in a mortar, and the resulting powder is soaked in a tamarind paste and water solution in an earthen pot for a day, and then put on the fire to boil. The cotton or silk yarn, previously soaked, is then immersed in the boiling liquid for 30 minutes before being rinsed and hung to dry.

Indigo plants are about a metre high with leaves like the tamarind. They are usually specially grown in rice paddies or orchards, because the wild indigo gives poor colouring. When mature, the indigo plants are cut down, made into bundles and packed in an earthen jar filled with water for three days, after which they are thrown away. In the meantime the villagers gather snails which are burnt with the bark of the "pleuang" tree; special shells are also wrapped in banana leaves or put in earthen jars to calcify into lime.

When ready, the lime is mixed with the indigo-water in special proportions, and after the sediment has settled the water is carefully decanted into another vessel where it is mixed with a ashes of the Cassia Siamea tree. Again the sediment is allowed to settle, and the solution is drained into an earthen pot and put on the fire. Three pulverised chunks of sugar cane, three crushed carambola fruits and the indigo residue are stirred into the solution and well mixed, and the yarn is then dipped until the desired colour is reached.

It all sounds very scientific and involved... Or is it rather like a witches' brew? At any rate, the ingenious and hard-working villagers of the Northeast have discovered successful and effective ways of using local natural products to make the vivid colours which they weave into beautiful designs in cotton and silk.

As I mentioned, black dye is produced from berries of the "grajai", a tall tree which grows in the forest of Northeast Thailand. The crushed berries are soaked in water for 30 minutes and strained. The cotton (or silk) yarn to be dyed is first soaked in water, then dipped in the black liquid, rinsed and hung to dry.

All these northeastern dyeing processes are considered highly secret, so whenever yarn is to be dyed the villagers fence off an area some distance away from the village. There's also a local superstition that if a woman in the early stages of pregnancy passes close by the dyed cloth, the dye will immediately fade and become useless.

Although the Northeasterners have many methods of weaving cotton, the one known as "gep kit" or "gep dork" (embroidery while weaving) is widely used in weaving cloth for household pillows, presenting to monks, weddings and various other specific purposes.

The 19 most popular designs mentioned and illustrated in Miss Vimolphan's book are based on local flowers, trees, animals and insects. Some designs are reserved for use by household guests, others for presenting as a sign of respect to one's elders for decorating a prospective son-in-law's room, for ordination ceremonies and so on.

Compared to the cultivation, spinning and weaving of cotton, sericulture (to give it its posh name) is much more long and difficult, mainly because rearing the silkworms on mulberry leaves calls for great care in protecting the tiny creatures from heat and sunlight.

Yet the northeastern women and girls carry out every stage of this ancient and involved process right up to production of the finished articles — "pasin mee" (women's tie-dyed ankle-length skirts), "pa sarong" (men's ankle-length skirts) and "pa-kao-ma" (men's loincloths).

The silk cocoons are boiled in earthen pots. They are

considered to be ready as soon as the chrysalids can be heard rattling when the cocoons are shaken. The top of the pot is straddled by a flat strip of wood with a hole drilled in the middle and a reel fitted a short distance above it. The filaments of the boiled cocoons are unravelled by passing them through the hole and winding them onto the reel.

The coarse filaments from unselected cocoons, known as "mai leuab," are uneven in thickness and colour when first reeled; they are unsuitable for weaving and are sold in the market. Subsequent reelings produce filaments which are thin and of uniform size known as "mai luad." These filaments are reeled into a basket to await winding onto a "leng", a cylindrical affair made of four pieces of wood. When the thickness reaches an inch, the hook is rewound on to a "koog" — a device made of four pieces of bamboo fixed at right angles — then back again onto a "leng" to twist the yarn to the correct thickness. The process is repeated until the desired thickness is reached, after which the yarn is wound into a "jai" or hank ready for dyeing.

Before dyeing, the silk thread must be rinsed in a solution made either from spinach, from the trunk, leaf or stem of a banana tree, a palm-tree flower or the leaves of the "peka" tree. These must be sliced thin, dried and burned, and the ashes are then mixed with water in an earthen pot (earthen pots seem to crop up all over the place, don't they?). After the solution has settled, the sediment is thrown away and the silk is soaked thoroughly in the pot and then boiled and dried. The process is repeated until the silk is clean. Another lengthy soaking in "ke" solution made from a thorny jungle vine, lasting three days, is also necessary before the silk can be dyed.

The dyes used for silk in the Northeast are similar to those for cotton, although the whole silk process is so long and complicated that nowadays some villagers are turning to chemical dyes which are sold throughout the region.

Special mention must be made of the tie-dyed or "mut mee" silk, which Her Majesty the Queen has done so much to promote in order to help the villagers in the Northeast to increase their incomes. ("Mut" means to tie, while "mee" is the word for very thin noodles like vermicelli).

The procedure for making “mut mee” silk is to wind the correct length of washed and bathed silk to make a “pasin” (or whatever other article is required) onto a frame consisting of two parallel wooden dowels set at opposite ends of a rectangular board the width of a “pasin” (one metre). Strings made from banana fibre are then tied to the silk threads in the desired pattern. The silk yarn on its frame is then dipped into dye of the background colour, rinsed and hung to dry. When the threads are completely dry the banana fibres are cut off, and the undyed parts of the threads are dabbed with other colours. (It’s really a similar principle to the making of batik).

During weaving, of course, care must be taken to line up the separate threads correctly so as to reproduce the desired pattern.

So, all in all, the production of silk in the Northeast, and especially of “mut mee”, is a very long and complex job. But the often very poor village women and girls continue to produce it with the same expert skill with which their forbears have done so for generations, reproducing the intricate patterns from memory.

## Gift-wrapping

I believe the art of gift-wrapping is something specially Thai, and doesn't only become evident during the New Year season; it's done whenever gifts are presented, throughout the year — at birthdays, anniversaries and especially at weddings. Gift-wrapping is a special skill which seems to be handed down from mother to daughter or passed on from one school-friend to another. I think it's an example of the general delicate manual dexterity of the Thais, which finds expression in so many other art forms such as wood-carvings, gemstones, furniture and lacquerware. (Have you ever watched a maker of lacquer bowls at work in Chiang Mai, using his thumb as a template for the frieze pattern going round the bowl, and ending up full-circle at exactly the right place?)

In its own small way, the craft of gift-wrapping may also produce what can almost rank as minor works of art. (Gift-wrapped parcels are known in Thai as “hor kong kwan.”) It's mainly the ribbons, with their ends looped into graceful coils and worked into rosettes, that produce this decoratively frothy effect.

If you've ever bought a present in Bangkok (and if you've spent Christmas here, you have probably done so) you may know that you can have it gift-wrapped in this typically Thai fashion for free — no matter whether you've bought it in one of the big department stores or in the little shop down the street. All it needs is a little patience on the buyer's part; the wrapping process may take up to 10 or 15 minutes. After all, many salesgirls take just as much pride in their particular skill as the lacquerware maker does in his.

In the larger stores, one usually doesn't see one's purchase being gift-wrapped. It's whisked away to a special wrapping department somewhere in the inner regions of the

establishment, and when it reappears it's all dolled up in its gift wrapping, just like an actress emerging from her dressing-room in all her stage finery and make-up.

But perhaps, as I have, you've watched salesgirls in humbler, smaller shops going through the delicate business of gift-wrapping what you've just bought. Sometimes they do it in pairs, especially if they're younger and less experienced than average.

First of all the object to be wrapped is considered carefully from all angles — mentally sized up, as it were. Awkwardly shaped articles such as teak elephants are usually put in cardboard boxes to make wrapping easier. Then a drawer is opened and a selection of gaily patterned wrapping-paper, perhaps with classical Thai motifs, is offered for your inspection.

When you've chosen the one you like, the girl pulls it out — and as often as not, she finds that someone else has already cut a large square chunk out of it, making it just a fraction too small to cover your purchase. In reasonably good English, she says, “Ne` min`, Sir — how `bout dit one?” and offers you a second choice and more, until you finally agree on a pattern you like.

Now begins the elaborate process of measuring, folding the paper in a trial run, unfolding it again, snipping off a piece that's a bit too long, refolding, deftly sticking down the edges and flaps with tiny pieces of scotch tape already cut and held ready by the other girl. The two of them may then go into a huddle as to how best to set about the all-important wrapping process.

(By the way, have you ever wondered what they used before scotch tape was invented? I asked my wife, and she said, “Oh, there have always been different kinds of glue around. Sometimes in the old days they just used a grain or two of sticky rice!”)

Then comes the finale — the ribbon. Nowadays this is usually plastic, but at the more expensive shops it's the real thing, woven of silk or cotton. Either way, the delicate procedure begins: Pass under, over, across — it's almost a ritual, demanding intense concentration, and also something of a conjuring trick. The ends of the ribbon are left long, and

the tips neatly cut into a "v." And now comes the bit of what I consider pure Thai magic. Drawing one blade of the scissors across the last few inches of free ribbon with *exactly* the right amount of pressure somehow produces those beautiful, elegant coils.

I couldn't do that to save my life. I once asked a salesgirl where she had learnt to do it so expertly. At school, she answered matter-of-factly. I think this craft of making "hor kong kwan" is taught mainly at domestic science schools. My wife says she can't make a "hor kong kwan," but both her nieces, Apple and Mook, are quite expert at it. Apple has to be able to do it properly, being herself a salesgirl in a big department store, but her younger sister Mook is almost just as skilled at it — and they certainly don't teach it at her secondary school; she says she picked it up by watching a friend.

During Christmas and the New Year, I expect your house has glowed with colour from these lovely gift-wrapped parcels, as mine has. But have you ever seen the pile of gifts at a *wedding*? I'm sure the bride and groom must feel pangs of regret, even for only a moment, when they destroy the grace and beauty of those parcels by opening them.



## Some Thai children's games

"Gee, I could never do that — my hands are just too big, I'm too clumsy!"

The speaker was an American lady, the wife of an eye specialist. The occasion was a Ladies' Afternoon held as part of an international congress on ophthalmology in Bangkok.

And the lady was referring to the superb skill with which a young Thai girl was minutely carving a carrot into a tiny, delicate flower.

Yet if I'm not mistaken, that same lady (or someone who looked very much like her) did manage to make a creditable banana-leaf basket which later in the afternoon won a prize.

And several others among the 50 or so ophthalmologists' wives from all over the world won prizes too, during that afternoon when they were treated to a variety of new and very Thai sensations.

I had been told about the occasion a couple of months earlier by the charming lady who organised it, Mrs Cham-nongsri Rutnin, wife of one of Thailand's leading eye specialists.

"Khun Sri," as she's usually known, had in fact told me about one particular event — a display of traditional Thai children's games; and that was what I really went to see.

But I found the other displays — and the appreciation, both passive and active, shown by the eye specialists' wives — so interesting that I'm devoting some space to these other activities.

The demonstrations of Thai feminine crafts were put on by teachers and students of Chotivej Girls' College, a school famous for these skills. At the first table on the right, fruit and vegetable carving was in full swing, using the tiniest and sharpest of curved knives.

"How long does it take a young girl to learn how to do that?" asked of the ladies.

"Our courses at Chotivej last 10 weeks," replied the teacher. "They learn it three hours a week, so every student gets a total of 30 hours' tuition."

At the next table the uses of "baitong" or banana leaves were being demonstrated. Starting with large circular discs of the rather heavy, glossy leaves about 10 inches in diameter, the students deftly cut, folded, folded again, stitched — and produced beautiful little ornamental woven food containers.

Further on, "khao kriab pak mor," little Thai pancakes, were being made by the mysterious process which I'll never understand, and which I've described elsewhere in this book.

Across the large hall on the other side, exquisite flower decorations such as "puang malai" or garlands were taking shape. I asked a 16-year-old girl how long it took her to make one of the beautiful pear-shaped decorations called "poom", and was told about two hours.

There were several other tables, at one of which "look-choob," traditional Thai sweetmeats, were being made.

Meanwhile, the young children who were later to demonstrate the games were darting here and there, full of fun. Aged from five to about 11, and dressed in period Rattanakosin costume with brilliantly-coloured "jong-kraben" panungs, they looked just like illustrations in an old Thai story book come to life. The panung is a large piece of cloth, about two yards long for children. In the "jong-kraben" style, the two ends of the cloth are brought together in front, stretched tight, rolled tightly from the top edge to the bottom, and the resulting roll of cloth pushed between the legs and brought up to the small of the back, where it's held firmly in place by a sash or belt.

Some of the little girls, whose hair was done up in "jook" or topknots bound with "rad-glao" or circlets made of white orchids, took the large fruit seeds from the fruit-carving stall and sat on the floor playing a game called "ee-tak" or "scoop"; the object is to try to pick up each seed one by one without disturbing the other seeds, using a special paper

scoop. (I had a go myself, but couldn't even pick up one seed). The children were from Rajini (Queen's) School. So were the 25 or so older girls who demonstrated the instruments of the classical "piphat" orchestra and produced beautiful Thai music on the stage. Rajini School is Thailand's oldest girls' school and was founded by Queen Saovabha during King Chulalongkorn's reign.

After the lady visitors had tried their hand at the various unfamiliar Thai skills, their efforts were judged and prizes awarded. The prize giving was expertly and wittily conducted by Khunying M.L. Nualpong Senanarong in flawless English. The American lady proudly held up her banana-leaf basket and announced her plan to open a banana-leaf school in Dallas. A German lady won the pancake contest and said she was going to open a restaurant in Germany specialising in Thai pancakes. The Khunying asked her to display her product.

There was a moment's slightly embarrassed whispering, after which the Khunying announced "What a shame! Mrs X is unable to show us her prize winning pancake — she's already eaten it."

Khun Sri went to an enormous amount of trouble to give the ladies from overseas a good idea of Thai traditions and folk crafts, and the afternoon was a huge success. She also spent a lot of time beforehand researching and rehearsing what was certainly for me the highlight of that afternoon's entertainment — the display of Thai traditional children's games.

For the details of the games, and to help her in choosing the best ones for demonstrating to the visitors, Khun Sri made use of a long and detailed research study published by Chulalongkorn University's Social Research Institute, called "Children's Play and Games in Rural Thailand" by Dr Wannī Wibulswasdi Anderson (on sale at the University's bookstore). Khun Sri kindly lent me her copy of this interesting book, and I'd like to express my thanks to her and to the author for much of the information that follows.

Five games were shown that afternoon (not counting the informal "scoop" or "ee-tak"). Although Khun Sri rehearsed the children and gave them general guidelines based on the

book, she made it clear to me that the actual playing of the games was not controlled by her or any other grown-up; the children have their own rules, and this surely was what made the games so completely spontaneous and delightful to watch — and, evidently, to play, too!

The first game was “ngoo gin hang” or “the snake eats its tail.” The two oldest and strongest children play Father Snake and Mother Snake; the rest are baby snakes. They form a chain, holding on to each other at the waist, with Mother Snake in front. Father Snake asks Mother Snake where she goes to drink water, and she tells him. The baby snakes sway rhythmically from side to side, chanting in unison. Father Snake then tries to catch the last baby snake in the chain, and Mother Snake tries to stop him by spreading her arms out, but Father Snake always succeeds. The captured baby snake is asked if it wants to stay with Father or Mother. If it chooses Father, both “parents” shout “Your neck will be broken and dipped in ‘nam prik’ sauce!” If it chooses Mother, they shout “You’ll be set afloat on a raft!”

The captured baby snake is then “out”, and the game goes on until all the baby snakes are caught.

The second game was called “Mon sorn pa” (“The Mon hides the cloth”). One player is chosen to be “It” — in this case the Mon, a member of an ethnic minority in Thailand. The others sit in a circle. Everyone claps hands and chants in rhythm:

“Mon sorn pa  
Tukata yoo kanglang.  
Krai pler  
Goo ja dtee dtoot meung!”  
 (“The Mon hides the cloth.  
Something’s behind you.  
Whoever’s off his guard,  
Your bottom will be smacked!”)

While the children are singing, the “Mon” runs slowly round the outside of the circle, and suddenly drops the piece of cloth behind one of the children. He then runs round the circle so as to reach the same child just as the song comes to an end. The children aren’t allowed to look behind them or

make signals to the "victim", but they may feel for the cloth behind their backs. If the "victim" finds the cloth before the "Mon" completes the circle, he quickly picks it up and chases after the "Mon", who runs and sits down in the empty place. The "victim" then becomes the new "Mon". But if the "victim" still hasn't found the cloth by time the "Mon" reaches him, the "Mon" chases him round the circle, beating him with the cloth.

Before describing the other three games I'll explain the technique for determining which child shall be "It" (or "bpen" in Thai, meaning "is"). I remember when I was a child we had various ways of doing this, and I suppose the same is true of every country in the world.

The Thai method is — well, very Thai! I'll just describe the elimination between the last two players which Dr Wanni calls the "yam-yee" technique, in which the children recite "yam yee pao pee ching choob" — "mix mash, blow flute, cymbal." (My wife vaguely remembers a slightly different formula — "yan ying yao paka-pao ying choob;" try saying that very quickly!)

The two "finalists" have their right fists behind their ears, and as the last word "choob" is shouted, they thrust their hands forward in one of three ways — as a fist, known as "hin" or "rock," or palm upwards with fingers outstretched, called "gradah" or "paper," or with the first and middle fingers pointing outward, called "dtakrai" or "scissors". "Paper" wins over "rock" because it can wrap itself round the rock, while "scissors" wins over "paper" because it can cut the paper!

So now to game number three. This was "Ree ree khao sarn" or "Long is the rice grain." This game seems to be remembered from childhood by every Thai I've spoken to since; and in fact it's very similar to what I dimly remember as "Oranges and lemons" or "London Bridge is falling down."

Here's what the book says about it. Two children join hands to form an arch, and the rest form a column, holding on to each other at the waist. They sing:

"Ree ree-khao sarn  
song tanaan khao pleuak

kot khao sai jarn  
gep bia taitoon rarn  
parn ao kon kanglang ao wai!"  
Which means, roughly:  
"Long is the rice grain  
Two cans of unhusked rice.  
Choose the palms,  
put rice on the plate.  
Find money under the porch.  
The last person is caught!"

At the last word of the song, the arch comes quickly down to "catch" the last child in the line, who is then asked to choose between "jampee" and "jampa" (the names of two plants).

When all the other children have been caught and have chosen sides, a tug-of-war follows between the "jampee" and "jampa" teams. Those who are pulled across the line must join the opposite team, until one side has pulled all the others across and so wins the game.

Game number four was "pong pang" or "fish-trap net." This is very much like Blind Man's Buff; the child who is "It" is blindfolded and the others walk slowly round him or her in a circle, singing a song. They then suddenly kneel or squat down in a circle, and the blindfolded child tries to grab one of them and identify the child. If the guess is correct, the other child becomes "It."

The fifth and last game was called "Dtee mat." This is a team game something like "Tag" or "Catch" in which one child at a time tries to tag members of the opposite side. Anyone tagged is "dead" and is held prisoner; the prisoners form a line in the "prison," holding onto each other, with the front child's arms outstretched towards his own team, waiting to be rescued.

After each of the five games was demonstrated in turn, all the children lined up facing their audience of foreign ladies and gave a polite, smiling "wai".

After all the games were finished, the children — most of them now wearing cardigans, for it was cold that day! — were each given a present. And again they "wai'd", most fetchingly.

As I said, the games were completely spontaneous; the children showed not the slightest trace of stage-fright. They were enjoying themselves so much that they might have been playing in their own school playground. As I watched the magic in their laughing little faces and their dancing eyes, a lump came into my throat; and I realised once again why this is my country — why the only place I'll ever want to live in is Thailand.





# CHAPTER FOUR

# LANGUAGE



## Thai-English “word-pairs”

Thailand has a city called Chanthaburi; England has one called Canterbury.

The two names sound rather alike — and incidentally, both places have cathedrals. (I believe Chanthaburi cathedral is the largest in Thailand).

As a newcomer to Thailand in 1965, one of the first things I noticed — simply by looking at the map — was that the names of quite a few Thai towns end in “buri”; Thon Buri, Saraburi, Ratchaburi, Chon Buri, Chanthaburi. Change the “i” into a “y”, I thought, and they might almost be English or American place-names: Sunbury, Salisbury, Rothbury.

A great many place-names in English-speaking countries end in “-bury”, and many more end in “-borough” or “-burgh”, such as Peterborough (which sounds rather like Petchaburi), Edinburgh and Roxburgh.

Those English endings all mean “a town or city.” The same goes for similar endings in France (Strasbourg), Germany (Hamburg), and Sweden (Goteborg); the Italian word “Borgo” also means a town.

So perhaps I shouldn’t have been too surprised to find that the Thai word “buri” also has the same meaning of a town or city. (I can only think of one Thai town that *starts* with “buri” — Buri Ram. And I only know of one similar place-name in Britain: Bury St Edmunds).

Yet I felt it *was* surprising to find this similarity in the Thai and English words for a town or city, because the Thai language seems so very different, so utterly remote in every

way, from English or other European languages.

At the time I made the discovery, I didn't think about other Asian place-names such as Singapore (or Singapura as it is also known), Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka, or Nagpur in India. All of these and many more have endings similar to "-buri" or "bury". I just made a mental note that it seemed strange to find such a familiar-sounding and very common place-name ending as "-buri" so far away from my native England; and that some time I must try to find the reason for it.

What finally set me actively on the trail was a chance conversation about two years later. A Thai friend asked me what the letters "E.R." on British stamps stood for. "'E' stands for Elizabeth, the name of our Queen," I answered, "and 'R' stands for 'Regina', the Latin word for a queen." Then, just to make sure my friend had understood, I added the Thai word for "queen"; I said, "You know — 'Queen' means 'rachinee'..."

My friend nodded — but even before I'd finished speaking, the full force of what I was saying hit me smack between the eyes: The Latin word "Regina" sounds very similar indeed to the Thai word "Rachinee"!

Immediately I was reminded of my "buri/bury" problem. This time, I did more than just think about it; I talked to an English friend who had lived in Thailand much longer than I had, and who was also something of a Pali and Sanskrit scholar.

He told me that the secret lay tucked away in those two ancient languages of India, and suggested I consult a Sanskrit-English dictionary. I did so, at the central library in Chulalongkorn University.

Sure enough, I found the Sanskrit word for a queen was "rajni". Obviously the Thai word "rachinee" has come direct from the Sanskrit word. Equally obvious seemed to be the connection between "rajni" and the Latin "regina." At least, they sound alike. But the reason for this connection was something I still had to find out.

From the Sanskrit dictionary I also discovered (as I should have guessed, but didn't) that "rajni" is the feminine of "raj", meaning "great, powerful, a ruler." We find this word in the Indian "rajah," and of course we meet it every day here in

Thailand in such names as Rajdamnern Avenue, Rajdamri Road, Ratchaburi and Si Racha; for it means "royal" or "a king."

And what about that English word "royal"? It comes from the French "roi", a king, which in turn comes from the Latin "rex". And surely "raj" and "rex" are cousins of some sort? Just what WAS going on?

I eventually found the answer when another friend lent me a very clear and highly readable book by an American professor, called "Historical Linguistics: An Introduction." The answer is well known to all experts in linguistics, but such an expert I am definitely not; so it was quite new to me. Briefly, it is as follows.

Some time about 5,000 years ago, a language or group of languages was spoken which the experts have called "Indo-European." As far as I could gather, the region where it was originally spoken is believed to have been somewhere in Central Europe, between the Rhine and Central or Southern Russia. I also gathered that no traces of any written Indo-European language have ever been found.

From Indo-European there sprang other language groups, still very ancient. One of these is known to linguists as Indo-Iranian, from which came the languages spoken and written in Northern India, of which the two most important were Sanskrit and Pali.

Meanwhile, at about the same period in history — roughly 2,000 years ago — another branch of Indo-European developed and gave rise to the ancient European languages Latin, Greek and Germanic.

Because they all came from the same great-great-grandparent language, all these languages have similarities. Latin and Sanskrit, for instance, have close resemblances not only in their words but in their whole grammar and syntax.

Thai is not in itself an Indo-European language; but it contains many words which have come from Pali and Sanskrit. Some of these words came into Thai through the Mon and Khmer languages, and others directly, through the spread of Buddhism whose sacred Dhamma or Teachings were recorded in written Pali.

As for the language in which you are now reading this — almost every English word comes either from Germanic, Latin or Greek. (Many English words in fact come from Gothic, but this itself came from Germanic).

The same is true of nearly all modern European languages. “Buri,” “borough,” “burg” and “pura” or “puri” all come from a common origin. So do “rachinee,” “regina” and the French “reine.”

Here are some more examples of Thai-English “word-pairs” which have a common origin in prehistory.

There aren’t a great many of them; to date I’ve found about 70 or so. Because of their Sanskrit or Pali origin, most of the Thai words in these “pairs” are not the ones in everyday use, but tend to be either poetic or technical.

According to the latest edition of the Concise Oxford Dictionary, the English word “tooth” has come from the Gothic “*tunthus*,” which itself came via a Germanic word from the inferred Indo-European roots *dont-* or *dant-*. (This reference to Indo-European in the latest edition of Oxford shows how rapidly this area of linguistic research is growing; there are absolutely no references at all to Indo-European in the previous edition, 10 years earlier.) “Inferred” means there’s no direct recorded evidence, but the experts have a pretty shrewd idea that it’s more or less correct — and Oxford, like all good dictionaries, always errs on the cautious side!

Readers will, no doubt, recognise those two Indo-European roots, or should we say tooth-roots, “*dont-*” and “*dant-*”, in such modern words as orthodontist, which comes from Greek, and dentist, which comes from Latin, as does the French word “*dent*.” In Swedish, Danish and Dutch the word for tooth is “*tand*.”

...So what do you suppose the Welsh word for a tooth is? Why, “*dant!*”

And the Pali? “*Danta!*” One is tempted, out of curiosity, to search for a similar-sounding Thai word. The ordinary Thai word for a tooth is *fan* or *fun* (the sound is somewhere between the two), so there’s not much help there. But wait... The Thai word for a dental surgeon gives us the word we’re looking for: “*tantaphaet!*” It comes, of course, directly from



the Pali “*danta*.”

Consider now the English words “youth” and “young.” Oxford traces these back through Gothic and Germanic to the inferred Indo-European “*juwnkos*.” Clearly, “juvenile” and the French “*jeune*” both come from the Latin “*juvenis*,” and this must be descended from the same Indo-European root. And so is the Pali “*yuva*” — from which comes the Thai word “*yuwachorn*,” meaning young people in general.

At the other end of the scale, “age” comes from the Latin “*aetas*,” while the Thai word for age, “*ayu*,” comes from the Pali, which is also “*ayu*.” These must surely also share a common Indo-European origin, although Oxford doesn’t tell us what it is in this case.

It doesn’t help us with “navy,” either — beyond telling us that it comes from the Latin “*navis*,” a ship. It is with a little shock of surprise then, that one learns the Thai word for a navy — “*na-wee*”! This is no relatively modern borrowing, as might be thought; “*na-wee*” comes from the Pali “*nava*,” a ship — and the similarity with the Latin “*navis*” is too obvious to need confirmation from an Indo-European word, for there surely was one.

But Oxford does give Indo-European great-great-great-grandparents for father, mother, daughter and brother — all of which have similar-sounding equivalents in Thai.

First let’s take a look at “father and mother” in a few other European languages: “*pere, mere*” in French; “*padre, madre*” in Italian and Spanish; “*Vater, Mutter*” in German, and “*vader, moeder*” in Dutch. All of them are very similar, aren’t they? And English schoolboys used to refer to their parents with the Latin words “*pater*” and “*mater*” in years gone by. The similarity between all these words shows their common Indo-European origin, conveniently provided by Oxford as “*p’ter* and *mater*.” And on the Asian side, these became the Sanskrit words “*pitar*” and “*mata*” — from which have come the formal and legal Thai words for a father and mother, “*bidah*” and “*maandah*.”

There’s also a charming and poetic Thai word for daughter: *thida* (pronounced *tida*). This occurs in the name of one of Bangkok’s temples, Wat Thepthida, and in the word “*kulathida*,” a girl of good breeding. At first the

similarity between the Thai and English words isn't quite so obvious — until one finds that “*thida*” comes from the Pali word “*duhita*” — and both this and the English “daughter” come from the inferred Indo-European word “*dhugheter*.”

“Brother” is interesting too. It comes from the inferred Indo-European “*bhrater*,” which is exactly the same as the Sanskrit word. Obviously the Latin “*frater*” (as in fraternal greetings), the French “*frere*” (as in Frere Jacques) and the Italian “*fra*,” a priest (as in Fra Angelico), all come from the same hoary old ancestral Indo-European “*bhrater*.” And from the Sanskrit word for brother (which, as I just said, is the same, “*bhrater*”) come the Thai words “*paradorn*” and “*parada*,” also meaning brother — with the special sense of a Christian (usually Catholic) priest.

Next, let's look at a few numbers. Once we start on this particular hobby-horse, there seems to be no end to the Indo-European connection.

Those Thai tones, which have so often proved my undoing, are indicated by tone-marks in the written script, known respectively as “*mai-ek*,” “*mai-toh*,” “*mai-tree*” and “*mai-jattawa*” — or Tone-marks One, Two, Three and Four. (These endings are also used to denote ranks in the military). Leaving aside “one,” let's just note in passing the similarity in sounds between “*toh*, *tree*” and “two, three.” There's a connection there all right. The “*jattawa*” isn't so obvious, until we look in Oxford for the origins of the English word “four.” It comes via a string of Old English, Old Norse, Gothic and Germanic words, from the Indo-European “*quetwa*”. From this also comes the Latin “*quattuor*” which gave rise to the French “*quatre*” and the English “quarter,” and on the Asian side of the family comes the Sanskrit “*chatura*”. So **that's** where the Thai “*jattawa*” comes from...

(Incidentally, although a little beside the point as far as Thai is concerned, from the Indo-European “*quetwa*” also came the Greek “*tetra*,” as in “tetrahedron,” a four-sided solid figure.)

Let's go back to “three” for a moment. This English word, like its counterparts in all Western European languages, comes ultimately from the Indo-European “*trejes*.” Think of the various English words beginning with “tri-”: triangle

(three sides), tripod (three feet), tricycle (three wheels) and so on. This prefix “tri-” meaning “three” is both Latin and Greek, coming from “tres” and “treis” respectively. The corresponding Sanskrit word for three is “trayas.” All of these come from the Indo-European “trejes.” And the Sanskrit word explains why when the Thai people present a temple with a set of **three** monk’s robes in order to make merit, they call this set of robes a “pa-tri.” (“Pa” is cloth, and “tri” is pronounced exactly the same as in “triangle.”) Also, the cornerstone of the Buddhist faith, the Triple Gem (note the word “triple”) — that is, the Buddha, the Dhamma or his Teachings, and the Sangha or all Buddhist monks — is known in Thai as “Tri-rat” or “Ratana-tri.”

“Five.” Again, this comes via a chain of Old English, Old Norse, the Gothic word “fimf” and ultimately from two alternative Indo-European roots. “pempe” and “penque”. Either one will do, for they both could have given rise to the Greek “penta-” as in that well known five-sided establishment, the Pentagon. On the Sanskrit side, “five” became “panca” (pronounced “Pancha”) from which comes the Indian word for a special drink made of five ingredients, “panch,” or “punch” in English. And — have you seen the beautiful old Royal Thai ceramic ware known as “pentachrome” because it is decorated in the **five** primary colours? In Thai this is called “benjarong”. The Thai prefix “benja-” meaning “five” also comes from the Sanskrit “panca”; and we can see it too in the Thai name of the Marble Temple in Bangkok — “Wat Benjamabopit” — because it was built in the **Fifth** Chakri Reign...

“Seven.” Ultimately this English word comes from the Indo-European “septm”, as does the Latin “septem” (September was the **seventh** month in the Roman calendar) — and the Sanskrit “sapta,” from which comes the Thai word for a seven-day week, “sapdah”.

The English word “eight” (and its German, Dutch and Scandinavian counterparts) comes from the Gothic “ahtau”, related to Latin “octo” as in “October” and “octagonal”, related in turn to Pali “attha”... Is there any Thai word like that, meaning something to do with “eight”?

Why, yes, indeed there is: An “*att*”, meaning “one-eighth; an old coin worth one-eighth of a ‘*feuang*’ or one sixty-fourth part of a *baht*.”

“Nine” is perhaps even more interesting because in Sanskrit, Pali, and poetic Thai it’s the same as “new”.

On the Western side of the family, the English “nine” is related to the Latin “*novem*” (as in “November”), while the Latin for “new” is “*novus*” (as in “novel” and “novice”) — which incidentally explains why the French word “*neuf*” also means both “nine” and “new”.

All these Western words are very similar to the Sanskrit/Pali/poetic Thai “*na-va*” (Pronounced “*na-wa*”) meaning “nine” (as in “*na-wa-rat*” or “*naovarat*”, “Nine Gems”, and “*naowaloha*”, an amalgam of nine metals) and also “new” (as in Nava Nakhon, “New Town”). Isn’t it strange that “nine” seems to be identified with “new” in places as far apart as Thailand and France?

“*Dekm*”, the inferred Indo-European word for “ten”, became “*dasa*” in Sanskrit and Pali, so that in Thai there are various poetic or technical words beginning with “*tossa-*” such as “*tossaniyom*”, the decimal system; and “decimal” itself, of course, comes from the Latin “*decem*”, as in December, the 10th month of the Roman calendar.

A “cent” is the **hundredth** part of a dollar; a “*satang*,” the **hundredth** part of a *baht*. The Latin “*centum*” and Sanskrit “*satem*” both come from a common Indo-European root too.

“*Baht*” incidentally, also means “a foot,” as in Phra Buddhabaht, and in fact “*baht*” and “foot” do sound vaguely similar. “*Baht*” comes from the Pali/Sanskrit “*pada*”, which is obviously related to the Latin “*pedis*” (as in “pedal” and “biped”) and the Greek “*podos*” — which is where the “-pod” in “tripod” comes from! The French word for a foot is “*pied*” (as in “*pied-a-terre*”), and the Oxford Dictionary seems to think that the English word “foot” comes from a Germanic word “*fot*,” related to the Latin and Greek words. So “*baht*” and “foot” are indeed distant cousins...

Now for a brief look at another subject which depends very much on numbers: Astrology.

In fact, astrology depends on time — the time when a person was born. Time measured in “hours” — a word

which comes from the Latin and Greek “*hora*,” a season or hour. And so, too, we have “horoscope.”

Now it just so happens — have you guessed? — that the Sanskrit word for time or hour is also “*hora*”. So perhaps by now you won’t be too surprised to learn that the Thai word for astrology is “*horasat*!”

“*Maatr*” or “*maatra*”, a measure or a table of figures (as in “*maatrataan*”) comes from the Sanskrit “*matra*”, related to the Greek “*metron*”, from which come the English words “metre” (a measure of length), “meter” (a measuring instrument, such as a parking meter) and “measure” itself. “*Sataan*” or “*satanee*”, a station (police, railway or bus) is from Sanskrit “*sthatar*”, cousin of Latin “*stationem*” and so of English “station” (and also “stand”).

“*Taan*”, a donation, from Sanskrit “*danam*”, is related to Latin “*donum*” and so to “donation.”

And have you ever noticed that the Pali and Sanskrit prefix for “great”, which is “*maha-*”, is rather like the Greek one, “*mega-*”? Again, they both come from a common Indo-European origin. We find “*maha-*” in the Thai words “*Maharaj*”, a great king, “*mahawitayalai*”, a university, and many more. As for “*mega-*”, well, we use a “megaphone” to make “a great sound”!

The Thai words “*haan*” (a goose) and “*hongse*” (a swan, as in the “*Supanahongse*” or Royal Barge with its prow in the form of a swan) surely both come from the Sanskrit “*hamsa*”; and far, far away to the West, in Germany, there is the word “*gans*”, a goose, which is very similar. Remembering dimly from my school-days that the Latin for a goose is “*anser*” (crossword fans may have met the English word “anserine” meaning “of or like a goose; silly”), I could see the resemblance between this Latin word and the Sanskrit “*hamsa*.” My good friend the Oxford Dictionary says the English “goose” comes via old Germanic “*gans*” from that same Latin word “*anser*”.

Sometimes the Thai word is absolutely identical with its Western counterpart. The best example I can think of is “*sala*”, a hall or pavilion in a temple. “*Sala*” is itself a Pali and Sanskrit word. In Italian, Spanish and Portuguese, “*sala*” also means a hall. We have a very similar word in

English (well, actually we've "borrowed" it from the French); we can find it in the beauty "salon"!

Another word which is pronounced exactly the same in Thai as in German and Dutch is "*nahm*" or "*naam*" (the choice of spelling is yours) — which of course means "a name." In Thai, "*nahm*" usually means a noun in grammar, but we also meet it every day in "*nahm sakul*," meaning a surname. The Thai word comes from the Pali "*nama*," while the Latin is "*nomen*." (When we "nominate" someone, we name him). The English, German and Dutch words for "name" all come from Germanic "*namon*", a cousin of the Latin word. (*Nom d'un nom!* as the French say).

My astrologer wife is always talking (quite cheerfully) about "*morana*", the poetic Thai word for death. It comes from the Sanskrit "*marana*" which is related to the Latin "*mori*", "to die", and "*mors, mortis*", death. If this sounds a bit "morbid", well — none of us is "immortal"!

The Thai equivalent for "the man in the street" is "*kon sahman*" or "*sahmanchon*". In fact "*sahman*" means "common". It comes from the Pali "*samang*" meaning "equally or evenly", and this surely is related to the Gothic "*sama*" — which means "the same"!

Many Thai personal names begin with "*Som-*" meaning "fulfilment", such as Somchai, Somboon and Somporn. "*Som*" comes from the Pali "*samma*" meaning "perfected" as in "*Samma Sambuddhasa*," the Completely Self-Awakened One, that is, the Buddha. And I've more than a hunch that "*samma*" is related to the Latin "*summus*", "the highest", from which comes the English word "summit".

In Thai there are various words for a god or an angel; "*Theva*," "*Thevada*" and "*Thep*" (as in Krung Thep, the City of Angels) are the most common ones. They come from the Pali words "*deva*" and "*devata*". These are obviously related to the Latin "*divus*" or "*deus*", meaning a god, from which come English words such as "divine" and "deity".

What about life itself? The word "life" looks as if it's connected with the Latin "*vivus*" meaning "alive", and "*vivere*", to live (*Vive le Roi!*) — and anyway, the English words "vivid" and "vivacious" come straight from the Latin. The Sanskrit word for life is quite similar to the Latin — it's



“*jiva*”. And from “*jiva*” come the two Thai words for life — “*chiwit*” and “*chiwa*”.

“*Montri*” is the Thai word for a high government official. It comes from the Sanskrit “*mantrin*”, a counsellor. There’s nothing remarkable about that; but from “*mantrin*” there also comes — via Hindi and Malay — a **Portuguese** word, “*mandarim*”. And from this Portuguese word has come the English word “*mandarin*”! It’s **not** a Chinese word — according to Oxford, anyway!

Now we come to the more “poetic” Thai words; words whose connection with their English counterparts more or less speaks for itself. “*Nasik*”, a nose; “*waja*” or “*waji*”, a voice; “*swaht*”, sweetness; “*madhu*”, honey (from the same origin as the English “*mead*”).

The Thai word for “automatic” is “*attanomat*”; “*wittaya*” means “knowledge or wit” (in its earlier English sense, as in “unwittingly”), and its Sanskrit origin “*vidhya*” or “*vid*” is connected with the English words “wisdom” and “vision”. The man’s name Vira (also spelled Veera or Weera) means “virile”; “*pastraporn*,” “clothes, comes from Sanskrit “*vas-tra*” — obviously out of the same clothes-drawer as Latin “*vestis*” and English “vest;” “*boon*” (the Thai word meaning “good deeds” or “merit”) is probably related (via Sanskrit “*punya*” and Latin “*bonus*”) with “boon”, the English word.

Whenever you come across a Thai word which sounds even remotely like its English equivalent, the Thai and English words more likely than not share a common Indo-European origin some five thousand years in the distant past. You may even form the habit of tracking down Thai-English word-pairs yourself; it’s quite catching. All these words form a cultural link between our two languages; a link which is all the more valuable because it brings back to us so forcefully the common origin of all mankind.



## **“Romanising” Thai names**

Thai surnames, as well as first names, names of streets and towns and especially names of shops, may cause some difficulty to native English speakers when spelt in Roman characters. There are several reasons for this.

First, it isn't always possible; the exact Thai sound sometimes just can't be rendered in “English” spelling. This is one reason why the same name, especially first names, may be seen spelt in a bewildering variety of ways in Roman characters.

To take a few examples of the difficulty of rendering Thai sounds in English spelling, the short Thai vowel “A” is halfway between the English “a” as in “cap” and “u” as in “cup;” it's almost exactly the same sound as a north-country Englishman utters when he says “Th'art a BAD LAD” or “On Ilkla Moor baht 'AT”. So Thai names such as Pan, San and Aranya are sometimes spelt Pun, Sun and Arunya.

Two Thai consonants have no exact equivalents in English (and are therefore very difficult for a native English speaker to pronounce when they occur at the beginning of a word). The first is half-way between “D” and “T”, and the second is half-way between “B” and “P”. I have tried to overcome this difficulty by writing them as “DT” and “BP” respectively — for instance, in the “Tod Pa Bpa” ceremony.

Many of the 48 Thai vowels and diphthongs are also difficult to express in Roman characters in such way that a native English speaker can produce the right sound, although one or two correspond very closely to French vowel sounds.

Consider the northern suburb of Bangkok commonly spelt “Bangsue”. Many native English speakers haven't a CLUE to say the second syllable, and settle for something vaguely rhyming with the word “clue”! After all, Sue is a very

common girl's name in the English-speaking world, and the obvious thing seems to be to pronounce "Bangsue" in the same way.

But the actual sound is a bit closer (only a bit, but every little helps) to "Bangsir". For those who speak French, the vowel sound in "SEUL" is very close to the Thai sound, and if the name were being spelt for native French speakers, "Bangseu" would produce almost the right result. But this spelling might confuse a good many native English speakers!

With very few exceptions, Thai pronunciation is much more logical and consistent with the Thai spelling system than English. (Pity the poor Thai student struggling with the English language; how about these groups of words for sheer inconsistency? Bomb, comb, tomb; or, bough, cough, rough, though, thought, through!) But once you can read Thai and know the rules of Thai spelling, you can pronounce pretty well every Thai word correctly — without necessarily knowing what it means! This at any rate has been my own experience.

But many Thai proper names come from ancient Sanskrit or Pali, and this is reflected in their Thai spelling. Their pronunciation still follows the Thai rules, often modified by the use of a kind of cancellation sign known as a "garan" placed above a letter, which makes that letter silent. However, when transcribed into Roman characters the "silenced" letter is often kept there (because it was there in the Sanskrit) sometimes supported by an "a" before or after or both.

And there are other ways, too, in which the westernised spellings of Thai names have kept to the old Sanskrit form, giving results which suggest a pronunciation different from the correct one.

For instance, take the government-run handicrafts shop in Larn Luang Road. The actual Thai spelling of this shop is Narain Pant (I've changed the Thai letters into their nearest Western equivalents). But in the Thai spelling, the final "n" of "Narain" and the final "t" of "Pant" are both "cancelled" by the "garan" mark, and are therefore silent. So the correct sound when spoken is "Narai Pan".

The first part of the name is that of the god whose Sanskrit name is Narayana (another name for the Hindu god Vishnu). And in Roman characters the Sanskrit spelling has been kept, with the result that the shop's name appears in print as "Narayana Phand". When pronounced at its face value by an innocent Westerner, this can lead to misunderstanding in conversation with Thais — especially taxi drivers!

To take another example, everyone knows Suriwongse Road. But many foreigners, especially those new to this country, again take this spelling at its face value, and pronounce the final "-se" with great finesse and a fine flourish of the tongue. Foiled again! In the Thai spelling, the final "s" (there's no "e") is silenced by the "garan", and the correct pronunciation is therefore "Suriwong" (or "Sura-wong").

As I said, these Romanised spellings are a result of the desire to indicate the Sanskrit origin of a name.

When King Rama VI gave surnames to certain families he leaned towards the Sanskrit spelling of these names in Western characters. Their descendants have in many cases kept to this spelling. It represents a great honour, besides preserving a cultural link with the past.

However, many of the modern generation of Thais, especially those who have gone overseas to English-speaking countries for study, have often come up against the "spelling pronunciation gap" themselves. Frustrated by their American, English, Australian or New Zealand friends persistently mispronouncing their names, they've changed the westernised spelling to make it more phonetic for an English speaker.

Two of my colleagues have the same surname. The pronunciation is identical; so is the spelling — in Thai. But in English, one spells her surname in the Sanskrit style, "Dasaneeyavaja", while the other lady prefers the form "Tasaneeyavej", which is in fact closer to the pronunciation. If spelt so as to approximate as closely as possible to the pronunciation, I'd say it should be "Tassaneeyawed".

For there's no "V" sound in the Thai language; there's only "W", a consonant which occurs widely throughout the language and sounds identical with the English one. Yet

'countless individuals, companies and shops change the "W" to a "V".

This is just one example of the random state of affairs in the westernised spelling of names. It's a free-for-all. A brief look through the English version of the Bangkok telephone directory provided the following forms of the same name: Dhawatchai, Thavatchai, Tavatchai, Thawatchai, and Tawatchai. All are spelt the same way in Thai, but in Western spelling only the last version gives a more or less correct rendering of the pronunciation.

It came as quite a surprise to me to discover that the Thai spelling of "Chulalongkorn" begins with a consonant which to me has always sounded very nearly the same as the English "J". Evidently I hadn't been listening carefully enough over the years. Just as an experiment, I asked a Thai friend to say "Chulalongkorn" and then the English word "July". Listening carefully and repeatedly first to one word and then the other, I could detect no difference in the first syllable.

Then I changed "July" to "choose" and again asked him to keep repeating "Chulalongkorn" and "choose". To me, the first syllables sounded quite different. Listen carefully to a Thai saying "Chulalongkorn", and try to write down how you think it ought to be spelt from the pronunciation. My own version is "Ju-LAH-long-gorn".

Other examples of words which I feel could be spelt more in accordance with their actual pronunciation (my suggestions in brackets) are: Kanchanaburi (Ganjanaburee); Chanthaburi (Jantaburee); and Thailand's famous boys' secondary school, Suan Kularb (Suan Gulahp).

I suggest to everyone staying in Thailand for, say, longer than two years that it's worth learning the Thai alphabet; just enough to know the rules of pronunciation, so that when you see a name in print or the name above a shop, you know more or less how to say it correctly, rather than following the not necessarily reliable westernised spelling.

You'll get a lot of fun out of trying to decipher advertising signs and shop names during those interminable waits at traffic lights. Come to think of it, that's how I first started learning to read Thai!

## Teaching English

Somebody once coined the witticism, "Speech was given to us in order that we might conceal our thoughts." Whoever it was, he might have realised that his words had a subtle double meaning if he had ever tried to teach English to Thais (and to Japanese) or to learn to speak Thai.

During the past 14 years I have been trying to do all of those things. (In one rather strange case, I even found myself trying to *teach* Thai to an English teenage boy for a few months — see next section).

It all began when I was teaching something quite different (how to make 8mm educational films on a shoestring) at Chulalongkorn University. The head of the Science Faculty's English Department asked me if I'd like to help out by teaching English, since after all I *am* English.

Certainly, I replied, I'd be delighted to give it a try; but I pointed out that I had no language-teaching qualifications or experience whatever. Never mind, he said, he was sure I'd manage all right. And so I started.

Perhaps luckily for me in my first attempts to teach our highly complex and utterly illogical English language, all my "Chula" students were a quiet, well-behaved and hard-working lot. And to be honest, I think I didn't do all that badly, even if my teaching methods were a bit unorthodox.

As I said in the previous section, we native English speakers have no fewer than six ways of pronouncing "-OUGH". And our verbs have 14 (yes, *fourteen*) different tenses — and we use all of them in everyday speech.

The "Chula" lecture rooms were quiet; those that weren't air-conditioned were usually surrounded by a decorous academic hush, and even with my rather weak voice I had no difficulty in making myself heard. But my voice doesn't "carry" well across a room, and this led to a rather

disconcerting experience later.

A friend told me about a language school which needed another English teacher for evening classes and could be a source of extra income for me. The school was situated on the third floor of a building at a very busy intersection in Chinatown's Yaowarad Road. None of the classrooms were air-conditioned, and the noise from the traffic was almost unbelievable. The school principal asked me to give a trial lesson to a cheerful and pleasant class of young businessmen and women. I did my best, and — whenever they could hear me — they were very responsive, laughing at all my jokes and so on. But my voice very soon became hoarse from shouting above the traffic, and from time to time what was left of it was completely drowned out by a gale of laughter from the next classroom. Students at that school evidently enjoyed their English lessons in spite of the pitfalls in our language.

When my lesson was over, the principal paid me for it, shook his head sadly and said, "I'm sorry, but you are totally unsuited for teaching at this school. Your voice isn't nearly loud enough!"

Later I taught part time for two or three years at a large and prosperous commercial college where every classroom had the luxury of a microphone and speaker system. Although the classes were enormous — anything up to 75 boys and girls — it was sheer bliss; I had only to whisper, and my voice thundered English irregular verbs into every corner of the room.

At about the same time I began giving private lessons in my home to students in ones and twos. The length of time during which a student keeps these lessons up has varied from one single lesson to seven years.

The students who have come for their first and only lesson, and then thought better of it, are usually those whose English isn't very good but who are blessed with a wildly optimistic nature. They think I can turn them into perfect English conversationalists in one or at the most two months. When they find out that they have underrated the complexities of the English language and overrated my



ability to teach beginners — well, that's it. I'm at my best when teaching intermediate or advanced students. Even so, 12 years of trying to teach my mother-tongue has made me realise just how difficult English can be; and it has also given me a sense of great admiration for all my Thai friends and colleagues who can speak, read and write it so well. I have to keep reminding myself how poorly my own knowledge of Thai measures up in comparison.

One of the things I've discovered over the years is the importance of correct *stress*. The main reason why my Thai students can't always understand me is that they're unused to the English way of stressing certain syllables, and to the fact that the very short unstressed sound “-UH” is by far the commonest vowel-sound in spoken English.

Similarly, the chief reason why I can't always understand *their* English is that they are usually stressing the wrong syllables. To correct this, I give them a drill to make them distinguish between the sounds of TWENTY and SEVENTY. At first, many Thais tend to pronounce these two words almost identically: “Ta-WENTY” and “Se-WENTY”...

Another difficulty I soon came up against was that there are TWO broad categories of English spelling, pronunciation, meanings of words, and grammar: “British” and “American.”

During the first eight of my 12 years' teaching, I must have told hundreds or perhaps even thousands of Thai students that the way to pronounce “advertisement” is NOT “adver-TYZE-ment”. “The correct way to say it is ‘ad-VER-tiss-ment’!” I told them. “You must remember to say it like that.”

Then one day I heard an American colleague at the Bangkok World say “adver-TYZE-ment”... “WHAT did you say?” I asked him. He repeated it. “Goodness, is THAT how you say it in the States?” I asked, horrified. “Sure, how else would you say it?” he replied... I hope all those thousands of Thai students have forgiven me for my misguided and uncompromising “Britishness”!

In fact, the mixed usage of “British” and “American” English in this country has led to what I call “Bangkok English” or “Mid-Atlantic English,” because roughly half of all English-speaking Thais have learnt it the British way and



the other half the American way.

So I have to explain that they can say, for instance, “I spent 50 baht ON that book” (British) or “I spent 50 baht FOR that book” (American). Or that to a British housewife “washing up” means cleaning the dirty dishes after a meal, whereas in the United States it means washing one’s hands and face and tidying up one’s appearance after a journey or something of the kind. And if my Thai students say “By the time I had GOTTEN home...” I can hardly say that’s wrong, can I? All I can do is to point out that if they’re visiting Britain, they should remember to say “By the time I had GOT home...”

English isn’t the easiest of languages to learn, and having two basically separate varieties must surely make it even more difficult for Thais. Yet they master it in their thousands, some to perfection. How many “farangs” can say the same about Thai?

Understandably enough, most Thais who come to learn English at my home want me to teach them how to TALK English. They can read, and most of them can understand me when I speak; but when it comes to speaking themselves, they’re tongue-tied. “Poot mai ork!” — “I can’t speak it out!” — is their usual description of what I suspect is largely a mental block. Many of them are afraid of being laughed at for “saying it wrong” — a quite unjustified feeling, but one with which I can fully sympathise when I think of my own wife’s hearty peals of laughter whenever I’ve said something wrong in Thai (which is nearly every time I open my mouth).

So I gradually coax my students into speaking, syllable by syllable. By now I know most of the usual mistakes which Thais make when speaking English — mistakes which are surprisingly universal from student to student. One of the commonest is to answer “Yes” when we English speakers would expect the answer “No.” This happens as a result of our awkward negative statements which are really questions: “You’re not coming tomorrow, then?” we ask, and receive the answer “Yes” — which really means “Yes, that’s correct!”

Another common habit is to say “Is mean...” instead of “It

means..." My job when teaching English is to try to make my students lose these wrong but often deep-rooted habits.

I have also taught, and continue to teach, a few of Bangkok's Japanese community. Here my problems are rather more serious, for whereas I can always drop into Thai to explain things to my Thai students, my knowledge of Japanese is more or less limited to "Sukiyaki," "Samurai" and "Sayonara."

Once, about six years ago, a delightful young Japanese couple came to learn English with me. On that first evening, I said, "Now, I must find out how good your English is." An innocent enough remark, I thought, but all it produced was silence and a blank stare. I spoke a bit more slowly: "How well can you speak English?" I asked, enunciating each word in my best BBC-announcer voice. Another blank stare. "CAN...YOU...UNDERSTAND...ME..?" I asked, leaving a pause of several seconds between each word. I was still met with utter incomprehension.

A feeling of wild panic swept over me, and I had a violent impulse to leave them sitting there and go to bed... But all was well; I soon discovered that (a) they could READ English quite well, but apparently had never heard it spoken by an Englishman before; and (b) they both spoke good Thai! The rest of that lesson and all future lessons (which went on for about six months, after which the young Japanese wife had a baby and that was the end of that) were conducted in Thai.

At the time of writing I have another Japanese student whose knowledge of English is only marginally better than my knowledge of Japanese. Again, we simply have to communicate in Thai. Luckily we also share a similar sense of humour, and our lessons are often hilarious.

The other evening we were discussing types of question and answer, and I pointed out that a simple question like "Are you coming?" can only be answered with "Yes" or "No." But a question such as "WHY aren't you coming?" must have an answer beginning with "Because..." I wrote down an example of such a question and answer in his notebook. (Here again, he can read my handwriting quite

easily). He seemed to understand; he nodded, and we went on to something else.

After a minute he touched my arm. "Excuse me," he said (in English), and pointed to my written word "Because." "Because? Because?" he asked, and then lapsed into Thai: "Passah Thai wah arai?" ("What does it mean in Thai?") That was when I first realised he didn't know the meaning of the English word "Because". "Proh-wah!" (the Thai for "Because") I answered. "AH!!!" He shouted. "Proh-WAH!" It was almost like Archimedes shouting "Eureka!" as he leapt out of his bath. Immediately, he wrote down in his notebook, next to my written word "Because", the JAPANESE word for "Because"!

## Learning Thai

A “farang” friend of mine, a lady who was attending Thai language classes, was a bit startled when the teacher asked her (or so she thought) whether she was wearing panties...

Why, yes, she answered. But....?

It turned out that what the teacher had asked her was whether she had a map (of Bangkok). The Thai word for a map is “paen-TEE”...

I thought this anecdote typical of the sort of misunderstanding that occurs when “farangs” start learning Thai, and I asked my friend if she had any more funny stories about her Thai classes. She couldn’t think of any, but she asked her husband, who has private lessons at home. “I can’t think of anything special,” he said rather glumly, “except that whenever I say anything at all in Thai, my teacher always bursts out laughing.” He has my sympathy; I have the same experience with my wife.

With me, it’s usually a case of forgetting the correct tone. I haven’t yet asked a men’s tailor, “How much is that tiger in the window?” (“seua” with a rising tone) when I mean, “How much is that shirt?” (“seua” with a *falling* tone); but when I order my lunch from our canteen, I always manage to ask for a “North steak” (“neua” with a rising tone) instead of a “beef steak” (“neua” with a falling tone).

Another subtlety that trips me up is the difference between a mechanic and an elephant. The first is “chang” in a falling tone, the second is “chang” in a *high* tone....

In spite of difficulties such as these, I would like to suggest to all “farangs” who are staying two years or longer in this country (or even less, if you’re really keen) that it’s well worth making the effort to learn Thai. It’ll make your life here so much more enjoyable, even if you aren’t the world’s most brilliant linguist.

A Thai friend helped me to do this during my first few months here. Later I decided to teach myself — a rather ineffective way of going about it, but I used what I still considered the best textbook I know, “Fundamentals of the Thai Language.” In this way, and by talking to people in the course of my daily life, I gradually picked up a smattering of Thai.

Then one day, after I’d been here four years, a friend told me of a good, inexpensive Thai teacher who held classes conveniently near my apartment, and at a suitable time, too — 5.30 p.m. I decided to enrol. The teacher, Khun Boonsiri, was a woman of about my own age. Apart from her considerable charm, she was an excellent teacher with a delicious sense of humour — an asset which she often needed with her rather absent-minded pupils, of whom I was one of the worst offenders.

Our classes were very small, fluctuating between three and seven students — and looking back, my impression is that there were different students each time, apart from a few “regulars” such as myself. The star performers were two Filipina women married to Thais, with Thai children born and raised in this country. These ladies told me their children were a bit ashamed of their mothers’ poor standard of spoken Thai, so they were trying to improve it. I could never understand what they were worried about; their Thai seemed far, far ahead of mine.

I think my favourite classmate was an ex-GI whom I’ll call Bill. If it hadn’t been for Bill, I would always have been bottom of the class. But, bless his heart, Bill’s memory was even worse than mine. He was a determined trier, but no matter how hard he gritted his teeth, clutched his brow or rolled his eyes, he never seemed able to carry any Thai word in his head for more than two minutes. I always felt grateful to Bill for making even more mistakes than I did...

Khun Boonsiri hardly ever spoke any English in class, except for such basic words as “verb,” “adjective” or “classifier” (something I won’t go into here; you’ll find out what a “classifier” is as soon as you start learning Thai!) She started us off straight away reading aloud from a Thai book — not as difficult as it sounds, because the book was a

Prathom I (first primary grade) Thai Reader for Fairly Tiny Tots. The print was large and clear, there were plenty of simple illustrations, and the subject was a basic one — hygiene.

Week after week we took turns at reading aloud Thai sentences such as “If we wash behind our ears every night we will grow up strong and healthy.” What had seemed difficult at first gradually became easier, until one day we found to our surprise that we had actually finished the whole book.

Then we began a new book, one of a series specially produced by the Ministry of Education for adult illiterates. Its print was quite easily legible, although smaller and rougher than in the Tiny Tots book we had started off with. The stories and articles were short, varied and interesting. They dealt with topics ranging from Thailand’s historical heroes such as King Naresuan the Great, to more practical matters.

I remember one particular story about Nai Dam and his wife Nang Daeng. Nai Dam didn’t know how to tell the time, and went to the station to catch the once-a-day train for Bangkok, only to find it had left half an hour before. When he returned shamefaced, Nang Daeng roared with laughter. Moral: It is useful to be able to tell the time.

After we’d finished that book, we found ourselves — rather to our astonishment — reading aloud from a Thai newspaper. The ex-GI, Bill, once had to read a Thai word which none of us seemed to have met before. Painfully Bill worked it out, syllable by syllable: “OR-SER-TREH-LIER.” “That’s right,” said Khun Boonsiri encouragingly, “go on.” But Bill — and the rest of us — looked puzzled. Suddenly Bill let out a triumphant roar of laughter as he realised that he had just read “Australia!”

Khun Boonsiri always encouraged us to write a few Thai sentences of our own, as homework. We used to bring our efforts into class each week and she would read them out and correct them.

One day we had learnt about the passive, which is used only occasionally in Thai. Anyway, this made me embark on a rather ambitious Thai sentence involving the passive, as part of my homework: “If we don’t use a mosquito-net, we

shall be bitten by mosquitoes.” However, I had somehow failed to grasp the finer details of how to use the passive in Thai; and when she read out my sentence in class, Khun Boonsiri was suddenly overcome by an uncontrollable fit of laughing. What had I done wrong?

When she had wiped the tears from her eyes, she announced to the class that I had written, “If we don’t use a mosquito-net, we shall bite the mosquitoes...”

Our classes were certainly full of merriment, and at the end of eight months my Thai had improved a lot — for which I’ll always be grateful to our excellent teacher, Khun Boonsiri.

About two years later, an English friend, Pamela, phoned me to ask if I would give her teenage son Richard THAI lessons.

“WHAT??” I asked, unable to believe my ears. “Are you crazy, Pamela? I’m no expert in the Thai language — it would be like the blind leading the blind! Why don’t you send him to Khun Boonsiri? She’s marvellous.”

“No,” said Pamela very firmly. “Richard wants YOU to teach him. PLEASE.”

And so it was arranged, and for the next few months Richard came to my house twice a week to “learn Thai.” It was a dismal failure. Richard was a nice boy, but he had an appalling memory. Most of our lessons consisted of him saying “Er...” and clicking his fingers with the effort of trying to remember what I had told him five minutes before. I don’t think many of the words or rules I taught him remained in his mind afterwards...

But there was one Thai word which Richard knew well. He had known it before starting “lessons” with me. The word was “NGOO,” which means a snake. Most Westerners find it difficult at first to pronounce any word beginning with the sound “NG,” and Richard was no exception; but although he couldn’t say “NGOO” correctly, he knew what it meant — and what’s more, he could actually WRITE it in Thai.

Richard told me the story of how he learnt this word. The family had been spending the weekend at Pattaya, and they’d taken a boat out to Koh Larn island. There, Richard wandered off by himself and started climbing a trail which



led up through the jungle towards the top of the hill. Halfway up he came to a sandy clearing, where he sat down for a rest.

A few minutes later a Thai boy of about Richard's age, a native of the island, appeared from the surrounding jungle and greeted Richard with a friendly grin. Richard grinned back, and the boy sat down beside him. Somehow they struck up a friendship — heaven knows how, since neither could speak word of the other's language.

Suddenly there was a sharp rustling sound in the undergrowth. "NGOO!" said the Thai boy. Of course Richard didn't understand, and the blank look on his face must have said as much. The other boy picked up a twig, and drew a lifelike picture of a snake in the sand. Immediately, Richard understood.

The boy then wrote "NGOO" in Thai characters in the sand, and said the word again. Richard tried to imitate him, but all he could manage was "UN-GOO."

I don't know how long this went on, but the result was that the word, its meaning, and its Thai spelling became firmly etched into Richard's memory.

As I said, those "Thai lessons" with me as the teacher didn't make much headway — although both Richard and I tried hard. Whenever he couldn't remember a word I'd just taught him, Richard would comfort himself by murmuring "UN-GOO"; at least that was one Thai word he knew — even if he couldn't pronounce it quite right...

That was a long time ago, and I've lost touch with the family. By now Richard is grown up, perhaps even married (to a Thai girl, I hope!) But whether he went on learning Thai or not I don't know.

Yet I feel almost certain of one thing: For the rest of his life, Richard will never forget that one Thai word, "NGOO."

## Bridging the communications gap

“Bye!” I said a Thai colleague at Chulalongkorn University one Friday evening some years ago. “Have a nice weekend!” “Oh,” he replied, pulling a long face, “I have to come in to work all day tomorrow.” “Oh, dear,” I murmured sympathetically, “lecturing, I suppose?” “No,” he answered, “pottering.”

...POTTERING? It seemed a strange reason for having to spend all day Saturday at a university.

“Yes,” he answered, seeing my puzzled look. “We have examinations all day. There’s no one else available. So I have to potter.”

Slowly it dawned on me what he was saying: PROCTORING! This is the American term which we British call, rather clumsily I think, “invigilating.” It means supervising an examination, seeing that there’s no talking or cheating, handing out extra sheets of foolscap when needed, explaining questions that examinees don’t understand, and so on.

That little word “proctoring” is typical of so many English words which are a pitfall for the unwary Thai speaker — and for the native-English-speaking listener — and which may result in a temporary communication gap with “farangs.” My Thai colleague had dropped the “R” after the “P” (as it is so often dropped in spoken Thai conversation, but with absolutely no loss of intelligibility: For instance, “pla,” “fish,” often becomes “pa”); and he had also made the difficult “-CT” sound into an easier-to-say “-TT.” Thus “proctor” became “potter.”

So if you can’t always understand your Thai friend’s spoken English, remember — he’s probably having just as hard a time pronouncing our extremely difficult language as you are in understanding his words; perhaps even harder!

Any "farang" who's been in Thailand more than a day or two has probably come across the less-than-articulate waiter who offers "fly lie," and has learned to recognise this as "fried rice." There's also the classic and perhaps apocryphal story of the Bangkok-based Englishman who lent his car and chauffeur to an English friend while he left Thailand on a short business trip abroad. The friend promised to meet him personally at Don Muang when he came back.

On his return, however, the owner of the car was surprised to see only his chauffeur waiting for him at the barrier. "Where's my friend?" he asked. The chauffeur replied, "Your fend, he die!" "WHAT!" gasped the horrified Englishman. "This is terrible! What happened?" Just at that moment his friend came bustling up, all apologies. "Sorry I'm late, old man," he said. "I was just parking the car." The man turned to his chauffeur in confused amazement. "You see?" said the chauffeur triumphantly, pointing first to himself and then to the English friend. "I not die — HE die!" It took the two Englishman quite a few seconds to realise the chauffeur was not saying "die" but "DRIVE!"

The "communications gap" is part of the way of life for many foreigners in Thailand. The gap is caused by the tremendous differences between Thai and English. It's an unavoidable feature of life for the non-Thai — but it's also part of the fun of living in Thailand.

I once tried to explain the supreme importance of Thai tones to a newly arrived English friend. "If you change the tone it changes the meaning," I said. "Yes, well, it does in English too, doesn't it," he replied. "I mean, one can sound surprised, or angry, or sorry, or pleased, simply by changing the tone." "No, no!" I remonstrated. "It's not like that at all! Take the Thai word 'ma.' If you say it in an ordinary tone, it means 'come;' if you say it in a rising tone, it means 'dog,' and if you say it in a high tone, it means 'horse!'" "Oh!" he said, a dazed look on his face, and added hastily, "Well, I shan't be staying here very long, anyway — it's hardly worth learning Thai, is it?"

All I can say is that this attitude seems a pity, because life here can be so much more enjoyable if you can speak and

understand even a little Thai.

I often wish I were one of those relatively few fortunate Westerners who have really mastered the Thai language. I suppose such people are mostly either foreign service volunteers who have lived for longish periods with Thai families or in upcountry villages, or else scholars or semi-scholars with a natural gift for languages, which means a good ear for subtle nuances of sound — and a fantastic memory. (Thais say that such foreigners speak Thai “*bpen nam lai fai dap*” — “like water flowing enough to put out a fire” — a delightful idiom).

At the opposite extreme are those foreigners who can't speak Thai at all, either because they've only just arrived on their first visit to this country or because, though they may have lived here for many years, they're simply “tone-deaf,” as one such Westerner expressed it to me.

In between these two extremes is a whole gamut of semi-proficiency in Thai, such as mine. In my own case, I can carry on a phone conversation with the telephone operator or a secretary in a company or government department in the course of my work — as long as the talk is limited to fairly simple stuff such as “When will he be back?”

I often put my linguistic foot in it with those oh-so subtle Thai tones. After nearly 14 years in this country, I fell headlong into one of those many pitfalls for the unwary and careless “*farang*” listener.

The occasion was the wedding reception of Sasithorn and Andrew. Sasithorn, who is now Dr Sasithorn after gaining her PhD at the University of East Anglia in England, is an absolutely adorable person bubbling over with high spirits and with more than her share of the Thai sense of humour. I've known her for years, since her undergraduate days at Chulalongkorn University when she was a student of mine. Andrew, whom I had known for precisely one week, is English and a fellow-PhD student of hers. (They got married in England but for career reasons they couldn't make it back to Bangkok for a proper Thai wedding reception until a year later).

The wedding cake was brought in, and Andrew asked me how to say in Thai “Please help yourself to cake, everyone!”

I told him, innocently but I thought correctly, “Kor chern rapratahn kanom cake.” I was really careful about getting the proper rising tones on the “kor” and “kanom.”

The trouble was, I used an *ordinary* tone when saying “cake” — and Sasithorn, who happened to be passing at that moment, overheard me. She burst into huge peals of laughter, and rapped loudly with her knuckles on the table. Apparently that’s what “cake” in an *ordinary* tone means — “to rap loudly with the knuckles.” To produce the meaning of the English word “cake,” you have to say it in a *HIGH* tone — “CAKE!” Oh, well, I thought to myself, that’s another new Thai word I’ve learnt — “cake,” “to rap loudly with the knuckles.” And I suppose it was nice to have added a small and unintentional touch of entertainment to an already very lively and enjoyable evening...

It isn’t only wrong tones that can cause misunderstandings between the foreigner who fondly imagines he or she is speaking faultless Thai, and his or her Thai listener... there are also those two extremely tricky consonants that are half-way between a “d” and a “t,” and between a “b” and a “p,” which are really very difficult indeed for a Westerner to pronounce. Notice I say a Westerner, for Asians from other countries usually have much less difficulty with these particular sounds than Westerners do. (The reason, I think, is that these sounds also occur in other Asian languages).

There’s a story about an American woman who had lived for several years in this country and spoke passably good Thai — but on one occasion not quite good enough. She kept ducks in her garden in Bangkok, and one day she noticed that one of them was missing. She telephoned the local police to report the fact, speaking to the duty officer in Thai, and the ensuing conversation went something like this: “Yes, Madam, could you please describe it for me?” “Well, let’s see, it’s about average size, brownish-grey with white tail-feathers and a rather long beak...”

“WHAT??” gasped the astonished police officer at the other end. Unfortunately the lady had said “pet” with a full-blooded “p,” instead of “bpet” with that dreadfully tricky “bp-” sound. And “pet” means not a duck, but a diamond!

As I said earlier, I use my own spelling system, and I hope

readers aren't confused by this. The word for "duck," which I have spelt "bpet," is more commonly spelt "pet;" and the word for "diamond," which I spell "pet," is normally spelt "phet" (as in Phetburi or Phetchaburi, "the City of Diamonds.") My reason for adopting my own spelling system is that I have so often been misled in the past (or "phast"?) by the Romanised spellings of Thai words, leading me to mispronounce them for perhaps years until I chanced to see them written in Thai, that I now tend to spell the sounds of Thai words as I *hear* them. (See chart).

But those tones... They certainly give my wife a good laugh when I get them wrong — which I usually do.

"Pen kai," I sometimes complain when I'm feeling a bit off-colour. What I intend to say is "I've got a fever." Unfortunately, when I do have a fever I usually don't feel well enough to get the right tone; instead of pronouncing "kai" with a sharply falling tone, I say it in an ordinary flat tone — and it means "I'm an egg!"

Then there was the time I was telling my wife a long story about our friend Khun San, whose name means "Peace." I was so interested in the story that once again I forgot to get the tone of "San" right: It should be a rising tone, but I just said it in an ordinary tone. I became aware that she wasn't following the story at all, but was chuckling away quietly to herself. "What's wrong?" I asked, and she mimicked me, "Khun San," in an ordinary tone, and pretended to shiver violently. Then I realised — I had been talking about "Mr Shivering"! (The Thai for "malaria" is "kai jap san," or "the fever that seizes you with shivering").

Years later, she still has a good laugh over that..

If you're a newcomer to the Thai language, you may be interested to know that the sound which native English speakers would write unhesitatingly as "cow" can be pronounced in *nine* different ways in Thai, all with different meanings. The commonest meanings are "rice," "white," "he, she or mountain," "enter", "news" and "knee." Similarly, "ya" can mean, according to the tone, "grass or grandmother." (the same tone for both), "medicine" or "don't!"

Talking of grandmothers, in winter when the sun's daily path across the sky is at its lowest, I have problems with staying in the shade on my verandah during the afternoon. I have to keep moving my deck-chair and other sundry garden furniture, such as the table with its load of Thai-English and English-Thai dictionaries and so on.

One day, as usual, I bellowed for my wife to come and help me shift everything out of the rather too warm afternoon sun. I used the Thai word "yai", meaning "to move" (as in "yai bahn", "to move house"). At least, I THOUGHT I did... Again, I couldn't understand why my wife was laughing quite so heartily; and again, it was the same old "tone" trouble: I'd said (or rather, shouted) "yai" in an ORDINARY tone, and it should have been a HIGH tone...

What I had shouted was "Please come and help me maternal-grandmother my chair!"

In fact, at first my wife thought I was calling "grandma!" and she shouted back, "What is it, Granddad?"

I've always (well, *nearly* always) tried use the transliteration of Thai words which most nearly approximates to *the sounds I think I hear*. The exceptions are where there's a spelling already in widely recognised usage; and this, of course, includes all personal names and surnames.

In the list on the next page, I've left out those consonants and vowels where I think there's no ambiguity.



THAI	ENGLISH	EXAMPLE(S)	MEANING	REMARKS
ก	G	กบ GOP	A frog	But "Krung Thep"
ข	K	ขาย KAI	To sell	But "khon" (masked drama)
ค	K	ครัว KRUA	A kitchen	But "Khun"
จ	J	เจ็ด JET	Seven	
ฉ	CH	ฉาย CHAI	To project (a side or movie)	
ช	CH	ชัย; ชาย CHAI	Victory; a man	
ต	DT	ตก DTOK	To fall	
ด	T	ทอง TONG	Gold	But, of course, "Thai"
น	BP	ป่า PBA	A forest	
พ	P	ผ้า PA	Cloth	
บ	—OR	รอ ROR	To wait	
ป	—A—	พัน PAN	A thousand	But "Chart Thai"
ท	—AH—	บาท BAHT	A baht	
ด	—AM	น้ำ NAM	Water	
ด	—EU—	มืด MEUT	Dark	
ด	Usually —OO—	This can be a tricky one (or ones.) I sometimes add "as in 'foot'" for the first one, and "as in 'boot'" for the second.		
ด	—OH	เกาะ GOH	An island. (This sound really defies transliteration. I sometimes add "as in English 'NOT' with the 'T' removed"!)	
ด	—EUA	เสื้อ SEUA	A shirt	
ด	—AE—	แยก YAEK	A crossroads	
ด	—OA—	โกน GOAN	To shave	As in English "loan", "moan"

## Idioms and accents

My familiarity with the Thai language, even after 16 years here, is still about as subtle as a sledge-hammer. It sometimes surprises me that Thais can understand me at all. But then, I become just as surprised to find they can understand another foreigner's spoken Thai better than they can my own, when, as sometimes happens, the other foreigner's Thai sounds completely unintelligible to me.

I once had to carry on a detailed conversation with an elderly Japanese restaurant proprietress here in Bangkok. Our only common language was Thai, except that it wasn't really "common" at all, because I couldn't understand her version of the Thai language any better than she could understand mine.

Fortunately there was a young Thai lady present at our meeting who could understand "Japanese" Thai as well as my "English" Thai, and both the elderly Japanese lady and I could understand the young lady's own perfect Thai; so the young lady was able to act as "interpreter" — all in Thai, of course!

During a 10-day visit to Czechoslovakia in 1960 I realised that nothing gives you such a sense of utter helplessness as being in a foreign country and not knowing at least a tiny bit of the language.

So as soon as I knew I was coming to Bangkok in 1965, even (as I then believed) for only a nine-month contract, I began to think about how to learn Thai.

A Thai friend who was on a course in London very kindly promised to give me Thai lessons when we were both in Bangkok. To celebrate this generosity, I took her to lunch in a London pub, where with my usual subtle movement I succeeded in spilling beer all over her dress.

“Oh, please excuse me!” I said; and then a thought occurred to me: “How do you say ‘excuse me’ in Thai?” I asked her.

“Kotord, krap!” she answered. “That is, if a man is speaking. A woman says ‘kotord, kha!’”

I gave an involuntary little shudder of apprehension; this sounded even worse than Czech...

However, in the months and then years that followed, I did make an effort, and have been able to pick up enough Thai to get by. (Remarks from taxidivers vary from “How come a farang can speak such good Thai?” to “How come you speak Thai so badly, yet you’ve been here 16 years?”)

And to be honest, here in Bangkok most Thais are used to “farangs” and the way we speak Thai; their own ingenuity, I suspect, plays quite a large part in their ability to understand our efforts. I sometimes wonder how well (or badly) I’d fare if I were suddenly dumped in a village in the Northeast or the South. I think the puzzled villagers would have to get their headman with his superior education to unravel what I was saying.

I have learnt over the years that colloquial Thai is rich in expressive and often amusing idioms and turns of speech; that at the literary level, Thai is a subtle language rich in poetic and evocative words, mostly derived from Sanskrit, Pali, Mon and Khmer; and — most important of all for a foreigner — if you can’t remember the correct tones of each syllable of every word you use, you might just as well be speaking Eskimo.

Hardly a day goes by without my learning at least one new Thai word; so at that rate, my vocabulary should increase at about 365 words a year... But that’s reckoning without my appalling memory, because most new words I learn are promptly forgotten again by next day. If only I could remember all those new words which cross my path! How well (relatively) I could speak Thai!

Let me give you an example of one Thai idiom which I do know. It’s a very common one, and I’ve known it for several years now; as far as I remember, it took me about two years to understand it in the first place! It is “*Joot dtai dtam dtor.*”

Please don't ask such a straightforward question as "What does it mean?" It's far too subtle for that!

Let's analyse it word by word. "*Joot*" means to light or kindle; "*dtai*" is a torch made of rattan and filled with some kind of tree-resin, something like an Olympic torch; "*dtam*" means "just where you're standing," and "*dtor*" is a tree-stump. So the whole thing means literally "light a torch, but still stumble into a tree-stump," or something like that.

The best rendering of this idiom's real meaning which I've found is in So Sethaputra's Thai-English Dictionary: "To find oneself actually talking to the person one discusses or criticises; to talk to a person whom one seeks."

I'll give two examples. First, suppose one has gone to a government office to discuss something with a Mr Uthai whom one doesn't know, having been advised by someone else on the phone that Khun Uthai is the right person to deal with one's problem.

Getting into conversation with a young lady sitting at a desk near the entrance who asks one's business, one discusses one's problem and says one has really come to see Mr Uthai. "Oh," says the young lady, "that's me!" (Uthai can be both a man's and a woman's name, and of course "Khun" means Mr, Mrs, Miss or even Ms!) So there you are — "*Joot dtai dtam dtor!*"

Example Number Two: You're in an upcountry town where you've never been before. Perhaps you think the streets aren't quite as tidy as they might be, or something else is wrong.

Getting into conversation with a polite and well-mannered stranger in a coffee shop, you eventually confide your criticism to him, and even go so far as to criticise the mayor for allowing such a state of affairs in his town... Only to find that he IS the mayor! "*Joot dtai dtam dtor!*"

Well, how would you translate it? Red face? Mistaken identity? "Touché", as the French say? None of these really fits. No — this idiom is untranslatable, and that's that.

Writing "none of these really fits" reminds me of something else: The comparatively recent adoption into Thai of a few English words, usually with a subtle change of meaning. One such word is "fit."

In English, we talk about a custom-made suit or a ready-made pair of trousers as “a good fit,” or we may say “it fits perfectly.” But when a Thai tells his tailor the new suit “*fit*”, he means something else: It’s a bit too tight!

Another word in the same category is “fan”. In English, we use this in the colloquial sense of someone who’s very keen or interested in something — we talk about “a football fan,” “a film fan” (though that sounds a bit old-fashioned these days), and “a Rolling Stones fan.”

But in Thai, this word, pronounced “faen”, has only one meaning: A lover. Whether husband, wife, girl-friend or boy-friend, a Thai almost always refers to his or her sweetheart as “*faen*”.

Other English words have kept their meanings, but the pronunciation has been changed so that Thais can say the word. In a restaurant you ask the waiter for the “bin” when you want the bill — because there’s no final “L” sound in Thai. A film is a “feem”, ice cream tends to be “eyeteem,” a nuisance is “niew-san.” And guess what “bo-dai” is? A blow-dry at a women’s hairdresser!

I would like to tell you some more Thai idioms; but I don’t seem to know any. I’ve just asked my wife to think of some, but she can’t think of any, either.

Well, you know how it is; if someone asked you to reel off some English idioms, just like that, you probably couldn’t think of any at all.

And yet in English and in every language, one uses idioms all the time — sometimes without realising it, because the expressions are so common. For several years I’ve been writing a weekly column of English idioms for Thai students in “Student Weekly,” and the way I do it is to open the Oxford Dictionary at random. That way I find lots of idioms, and I then make up imaginary situations to illustrate how each idiom is used.

Let’s try doing the same thing with the Thai-English Dictionary.

Here we are: “*CHAK*.” It means “to draw, to withdraw, to drag, to drag, to pull, to haul, to deduct, to convulse, to be subject to spasms.”

It also appears to mean “slightly, a bit, somewhat,” and in

combination with other words, “a flush toilet, to burnish or lacquer, to be slow;” as an idiom, “*CHAK BAI HAI REUA SIA*,” literally “to pull the sail and spoil the boat,” but it really means “to distract one’s attention from the matter in hand...” And so on.

My wife has just told me (but very reluctantly, as she’s engrossed in a book which I’m sure is full of idioms!) that this idiom about the sail and the boat is quite common.

Foreigners who have been in Thailand even for only a short while will probably have noticed that many Thais find it hard to pronounce an English word which ends in a consonant after a long vowel, because such sound-combinations don’t occur at all in Thai. They have difficulty with words like SOIL, HOUSE and TIME, so they simply drop the final consonant and say “SOI”, “HOW” and “TAI”.

“What time is it?” becomes “What tai is it?” and this has given rise to a sort of Thai nonsense-saying, “*wat Thai tam dooey it; wat Angkrit tam dooey bpoon.*” It means “a Thai temple is made of bricks; an English temple is made of cement.” Completely meaningless, of course; it’s just that the first part is a sort of imitation of the SOUND of “what time is it?”

I’ve managed to teach my wife to say this correctly by getting her to join the “m” in “time” onto the “is” — with the result that (whenever she remembers!) she asks me “What tai MISSIT?”

A student of mine, whose English is quite good, had me puzzled for a minute when she described her English course at university. She told me about the “sow lab.” After she had described the “sow lab” I realised that what she thought she was saying was “SOUND lab” — that is, a language lab. I explained to her — to her great amusement — that a sow is a female pig.

There’s one very common Thai word which has come from the West — most likely from France: It’s the word for coffee, which is “*GA-FAIR*”. (That’s the spelling which I think comes most close to the pronunciation).

I suspect it had its origin in the French word “café”; and probably quite a long time ago, perhaps as far back as the Ayutthaya period.

This Thai word “GA-FAIR” has given rise to a kind of jingle or ditty which you may have heard on TV or the radio, or perhaps one of your Thai friends may have hummed it; it’s sung to the tune of the Western song “Truly, truly fair,” and the first three lines are:

“Dteun gor gin ga-fair,  
tiang gor gin ga-fair,  
wan yang kam dtong gin ga-fair...”

That’s as far as I know the words; they mean:

“Get up, drink coffee,  
midday, drink coffee too,  
from morn till eve we must drink coffee...”

A Thai friend once told me it’s a very old song. I wonder how old? (And I also wonder what effect, if any, it has had on the sales of coffee in Thailand?)

I suppose most people remember the film “My Fair Lady,” or the earlier film and play on which it was based — Shaw’s “Pygmalion”.

In the story, there was a London flower-seller called Eliza Doolittle who spoke, like many Londoners, with a Cockney accent.

Higgins, a coldly inhuman professor of phonetics, took on himself the task of making Eliza speak like a duchess, with a flawlessly “cultured” accent; he regarded her as nothing more than a sort of human guinea-pig.

A few years ago I was teaching English to a girl named Atchara. She had recently seen “My Fair Lady” in Bangkok, and there was something that was puzzling her; something that I found very interesting, because it taught me something I hadn’t known before about the Thai language.

What worried Atchara was simply this: If SOME Londoners spoke Cockney, then why didn’t ALL Londoners speak Cockney?

“In Bangkok, EVERYONE speaks with the SAME accent, whether they’re ‘high society,’ rich and well-educated, or poor,” she told me.

That statement needs qualifying. First, Atchara meant NATIVES of Bangkok — not migrants from upcountry, who speak with their own particular regional accent (see below).

Secondly, she was talking only about ACCENT — not the



actual words, idioms, slang or grammar spoken by different classes of Bangkokians.

That is, a native Bangkokian working man or servant girl will pronounce an everyday Thai word such as “jot-mai” (a letter) or “gradahn” (a board or plank) exactly the same as a Bangkokian university professor does. This is what might be called the “standard or Bangkok” accent.

It’s also known as the “central Thai” accent.

To sum up: *THERE’S NO SUCH THING AS A “BANGKOKNEY” ACCENT!*

At the time Atchara told me this, I was commuting by bus every day. So I protested to her — what about the bus-boys who collect fares? Many of them seemed to me to have a distinctly “Cockney” accent when they shouted “Bpai!” (Go!) because it sounded much more like “Bpoy!”

“Oh, that’s different!” she answered. “That’s the bus-boys’ own special accent; they’re well known for that.”

I never followed that remark up...

Before I go on to regional Thai accents, let me tell you about another incident from my bus-travelling days.

It was a little pathetic, in fact. An elderly Chinese woman in black baggy trousers staggered on board the bus, bent down by a heavy load. In a piercing voice she screamed at one of the two bus-girls, evidently asking where the bus was going. But the girl looked totally blank.

The old woman screamed her question at the other bus-girl, who also looked completely baffled. The two girls looked at each other, and burst out laughing.

The old lady then screamed at all the passengers indiscriminately, but no one seemed to be able to understand her... Until eventually one kindhearted Thai-Chinese passenger managed to make out what she was asking, and reassured her that she was on the right bus.

Which goes to show some of Bangkok’s ethnic Chinese community speak Thai with a variety of Chinese accents.

I’ve been told, in fact, that people of Chinese blood born in Bangkok and who can’t speak Chinese, usually speak with the “standard Bangkok” accent; but those who can still speak Chinese in one or other of its various forms — for instance, business people who speak Thai in the office, but

Chinese at home among the family — have a distinct accent of their own.

That's all I know about the kinds of Thai accent spoken in Bangkok — except, of course that migrants from upcountry still speak with their own "regional" accent; for like every country, Thailand has its own accents peculiar to different parts of the country — and special words and idioms too.

The same girl, Atchara, herself a native Bangkokian, was a student at Kasetsart University, and she told me there were some students from southern Thailand in her class. When two of these southern students were carrying on a conversation together, Atchara found she couldn't understand a word they were saying!

(Well, I've had the same experience myself in Britain. The Birmingham accent is notoriously unintelligible to non-"Brummies"; and I once had a Scots girl-friend up in bonnie Dundee in World War II whom I found difficult to understand at the best of times, and totally nonsensical when she was excited or upset).

I asked Atchara if she could tell me any more about Thai regional accents. Well, she said, the unintelligibility of her southern classmates was due to a combination of their southern regional accent, and strange words and idioms — and moreover, these southern words vary from province to province in the South.

She also told me there are four main or basic Thai accents, corresponding to the country's four main regions — North, Northeast or "E-sahn", Central, and South. Of these, the southern is definitely the hardest for Bangkokians to understand.

I often find taxi-drivers hard to understand, and I now ask nearly all drivers whether they come from "E-sahn", because I've gradually come to recognise that particular accent. Invariably they answer yes. In fact one northeastern taxi-driver told me that 90 per cent of Bangkok's taxi-drivers come from "E-sahn"!

I wouldn't be surprised, either.

## Poetic and evocative words

The Thai language has a rich fund of literature and of poetic words, phrases and poems which evoke deep emotions in the Thai reader or listener. I shall try to give some small idea of this aspect of the Thai language, although for non-Thai readers it must be admitted that much of the subtle meaning and feeling is lost in translation.

First I'll give the example of a famous Thai song which someone asked me to translate into English. This song is called "Sadu Dee Maha Racha" — "Praise to the Great King" — and it is one of the songs adopted by Thailand's Village Scout Movement. It contains many of these rare, poetic, and — for Thais — highly evocative words.

I asked several Thai friends and colleagues, all with a sound and thorough knowledge of English, to give me a rough translation of the song as a working guide. One by one, each of them considered the Thai words carefully, and then said the same thing: "I'm sorry — it's impossible."

Not a very promising start! But never one to take "no" for an answer, I finally said to one of my colleagues, an older man and a senior translator who knows the exact English meanings of a great many Thai ceremonial words and phrases, "Well, then, suppose I have a go at translating the song myself; would you then correct my translation for me? That'll surely be easier, won't it?" And, very goodnaturedly, he agreed to do that.

So, armed with three dictionaries, I started work at about 9.30 a.m.

By lunchtime I had made a very rough and highly inaccurate translation of the song. It took my Thai colleague and myself the rest of the day to remove the inaccuracies and mistakes, and produce something which he felt conveyed some faint echo of the original — perhaps as much as

could ever be conveyed by anyone other than professional scholars. Here, then, is our translation:

PRAISE TO THE GREAT KING (SADU DEE MAHA RACHA)

May it please Your Majesty our leader, King Bhumibol, beloved by the Thai people,

Our great Ruler, shelter of all the Thai people, widespread as the shade of the Bodhi Tree —

May it also please Your gracious Majesty our Queen, his meritorious consort, perfection of the Chakri Dynasty which resounds to heaven:

Your most gracious and Royal Majesty, our King, I praise you with a humble heart.

O Supreme King of Royal lineage, beloved of all the people, radiating merit as befits your majestic mien,

I humbly beg to prostrate myself, worshipping with joined palms, and offer praises to our great King and our great Queen.

The difficulty which my Thai colleague and I experienced in translating that song is typical of classical Thai poetry. Its beauty and charm cannot easily be appreciated by foreigners, of whatever race.

I have also translated another, much easier song, the “Pleng Chart” or National Song.

This should not be confused with the King’s Anthem, “Sansern Phra Baramée”, which is played at the beginning of every cinema performance and every night when TV and radio stations close down. I have already printed a translation of that song in the book “Thai Ways”. The National Song is a brisk, lively melody which schoolchildren throughout the land chant at the start of every school day. (That’s how I first became familiar with it, when I lived in an apartment which overlooked a large girls’ school. I used to listen to their lusty young voices belting it out at the top of their lungs every morning; it made a pleasant accompaniment to my breakfast). The National Song is also played by all radio stations when they start broadcasting at 6 a.m.

This proved much easier to translate than the other song. Here, first, is a transliteration of the Thai words:

Pratet Thai ruam leuat neua chart cheu Thai  
Bpen pracharat patai kong Thai took suan.  
Yoo damrong kong wai dai tang muan  
Dooley Thai luan mai rak samahki.  
Thai nee rak sangop  
Dtae teung rop mai klart  
Ekarat ja mai hai krai komkee...  
Sala leuat took yart bpen chart palee.  
Talerng pratet Chart Thai tawee mee chai. Chaiyo!

If you've heard the tune on the radio and can remember it, you might like to try fitting those Thai words to it — and the best of luck!

Here's the English translation (which I really don't think can be fitted to the tune, no matter how hard you try!):

#### THE NATIONAL SONG

Thailand — the flesh and blood of the Thai people  
United into a nation, with every part of the land truly Thai,  
So that the whole remains steadfast and strong:  
For the wish and aim of all Thais is to be united.  
We Thais love peace,  
But when it comes to fighting we are not afraid.  
We will not allow our sovereignty to be violated:  
We will sacrifice every drop of blood for our country's  
cause,

To raise the Thai nation to ever-increasing prosperity.  
Hooray!

One of Thailand's respected men of letters and a former Prime Minister, M.R. Seni Pramoj, wrote a booklet to celebrate his 60th birthday in 1965, entitled "Interpretative Translation of Thai poems," published by SEATO Publications. M.R. Seni pointed out that literal translations would be impossible and often meaningless. Rather, he tried to convey the spirit and meaning of each poem — and he also managed, very ingeniously and successfully, to preserve the metrical verse form of the original works.

The reign of King Narai the Great in the 17th Century AD is considered the golden age of Thai poetry, wrote M.R. Seni. And a Court poet named Sri Praj (pronounced "See Praht") was the most skilled of all poets of that time.

Unfortunately he had a mischievous habit of composing love-poems to the ladies of the Court, a weakness for which he was banished to Nakhon Si Thammarat in the south of Thailand. King Narai ordered the Governor of the province to look after Sri Praj, but to punish him for any further poetic offences. However, the King expressly forbade the Governor to execute Sri Praj under any circumstances.

It wasn't long before Sri Praj, true to form, composed a poem in praise of the Governor's mistress. The Governor — who, wrote M.R. Seni, had neither an appreciation of poetry nor a sense of humour — disobeyed the King and ordered the poet beheaded.

Sri Praj was accordingly tied to a stake on the beach. Before the executioner's sword fell, the poet wrote these last immortal lines in the sand with his toe, in the classical four-line verse form known as a "Kloang":

Be ye my witness, o sand.

God's image, though I stand at stake.

If wrong I gave, land true this sword.

If wrong here I take, strike back the striker.

Today, 300 years later, these words form a song known to every Thai. (My wife has just sung it to me.)

(Incidentally, Ayumongol points out that "God's image" is not a Thai concept).

Meanwhile, back in the capital, King Narai urgently needed Sri Praj's help with some poetry, and ordered him recalled from Nakhon Si Thammarat. On learning that the Governor had disobeyed his orders, the King immediately ordered him beheaded in turn. And so the last line of Sri Praj's poem came true: the sword struck back at the striker.

M.R. Seni also gave examples in his booklet of the work of other Thai poets, and especially of the most famous of all, Sunthorn Phu. He is often called the Shakespeare of Thailand, perhaps because he came nearer than any other Thai poet to understanding his fellow men and women. Sunthorn Phu's direct contact with the common people had an immense influence on his poetry, and through his work can be seen the whole panorama of Thai life 150 years ago; the people's loves and hates, joys and sorrows, their homes,

occupations, customs, beliefs and superstitions.

Here are two short examples of Sunthorn Phu's work as translated by M.R. Seni in his booklet:

Though the earth may end and the sea,  
Eternally go on love and life.

And:

A woman is sought for being chaste,  
Likened unto jade without impurity.  
Once it's cracked on unwise frivolity,  
The quality is damaged beyond repair.

But as with all classical Thai poems, one has to hear the original Thai spoken or sung to appreciate their full beauty. And even then, only a Thai can do so fully.

The next section deals in greater detail with one of Sunthorn Phu's well known works.



## How to be a good wife

Sunthorn Phu lived from 1786 to 1856 AD, so his life spanned all the first four reigns of the present Chakri Dynasty.

A Thai friend kindly gave me an oral translation of part of Sunthorn Phu's set of verses called "Supasit Sorn Ying," or "Maxims for Teaching Women." Because it seemed fitting, I tried to rephrase this in the form of Shakespearian blank verse.

Here, then, is Sunthorn Phu's advice on how to be a good wife.

\* \* \*

If you husband loves you, don't be stubborn;  
honour him every day; do not be wilful.  
When it gets dark, you should not stray away  
but light the lamp, go and see to the bedroom,  
make and clean the bed, sweep away dust.  
And every night when he retires to bed  
crouch at his feet any pay him homage. Never forget!  
If he is stiff with aches and cramps, ease them  
with soothing massage. When you go to sleep,  
be decorous; don't let your hands and feet  
stray over him while you are asleep.  
If you sleep thus, you goodness will shine forth.

\* \* \*

Don't go on sleeping till the sun is high;  
you should get up before your husband, and  
prepare water for him to wash his face.  
Then do the cooking and prepare the tray

of dishes to give a beautiful effect,  
along with the spittoon, polished and shining.  
Make sure no dust is in the drinking water.

\* \* \*

And if you know he has to go somewhere  
but find that he has not yet woken up,  
then gently get him up without delay  
to eat his food. Sit near him while he eats,  
in case anything lacks; don't give him cause  
to shout for it. Pay careful heed until  
he's finished eating. Then you yourself may eat.  
Don't eat before he does; it is not seemly,  
and he won't like it.

\* \* \*

If your husband is in the Royal service  
and must go in and out the Royal Palace,  
then you must prepare his carrying-case  
with betel and tobacco. Always try  
to wait on him, serve him, as a friend would do.  
If you thus serve your husband without fail,  
then you will prosper and rise in others' esteem.  
A true-born lady alway's shows her nature;  
don't throw your good behaviour to the winds.  
It is not good to be half-man, half-woman,  
and no one will admire you for that.

\* \* \*

And if your husband should rise up in anger,  
you should abase yourself to quench his wrath.  
Do not allow yourself to raise your voice  
and answer back.  
If he is fire, you should be as water  
sprinkled on him.  
If both of you are aflame, the fire will spread —  
anger which then can never be suppressed.

Your private conjugal feelings will escape,  
to become known to all the world outside.  
What neighbours didn't know, they now will know.  
So therefore, don't indulge in your own wrath.

\* \* \*

Be pleasing to your husband; he will love you  
dearly.  
Never fail to do the household chores.  
And if he should fall ill, do not disturb him  
but smile, console, be pleasing as before;  
talk to him only when he's well again;  
tend to his needs and pander to his mood.  
Whatever he doesn't like, you shouldn't do.  
Guard your speech, and don't be talkative;  
keep your own counsel, don't show your feelings  
outside.

\* \* \*

All the bad things forbidden by your husband  
you should avoid; your manners should be thus.  
Do not be stubborn and neglectful; speak  
only with sweetness.

\* \* \*

But if you have a quarrel with your husband,  
don't spread tales of the quarrel behind his back.  
Always suppress your own emotion  
and keep it to yourself; don't let the quarrel  
linger on; banish its shadow. Then  
you will be called one who uses her brains  
and knows how to conceal all evil things.

\* \* \*

Do this, and those who know you will admire you  
and think you clever. And your husband will be pleased.

\* \* \*

Another Thai friend suggested it might be interesting to compare Sunthorn Phu's advice with that of Shakespeare in "the Taming of the Shrew." So here is what the once tempestuous Katharine says after she has been reformed:

A woman mov'd is like a fountain troubled,  
 muddy, ill-seeming, thick, bereft of beauty;  
 and while it is so, none so dry or thirsty  
 will design to sip or touch one drop of it.  
 Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,  
 thy head, thy sovereign; one that care for thee,  
 and for thy maintenance commits his body  
 to painful labour both by sea and land,  
 to watch the night in storms, the day in cold,  
 whilst thou liest warm at home, secure and safe;  
 and craves no other tribute at thy hands  
 but love, fair looks, and true obedience;  
 too little payment for so great a debt.  
 Such duty as the subject owes the prince,  
 even such a women oweth to her husband;  
 and when she's forward, peevish, sullen, sour,  
 and not obedient to his honest will,  
 what is she but a foul contending rebel,  
 and graceless traitor to her loving lord?  
 I am asham'd that women are so simple  
 to offer war where they should kneel for peace,  
 or seek for rule, supremacy, and sway,  
 when they are bound to serve, love and obey.  
 Why are our bodies soft, and weak, and smooth,  
 unapt to toil and trouble in the world,  
 but that our soft conditions and our hearts  
 should well agree with our external parts?

\* \* \*

Is it coincidence that both Sunthorn Phu and Shakespeare were men...?

## Some Thai children's English letters

The Bangkok World's sister publication "Student Weekly" receives an average of some 100 letters IN ENGLISH every week from schoolchildren and older students all over Thailand. Of these, about 10 are published every week under the heading "Dear Editor."

I am reproducing a few of these letters in whole or in part. My criterion in making my selection has been, as always in "Thai Ways," to try to help non-Thai readers gain a better understanding of Thai attitudes and ideas.

These letters speak for themselves, and they need no comment from me.

"Dear Editor,

I AM 16 years old and study in MS3 at Sakaeo School, Prachin Buri... I like to study very much... I want to be a scientist, I want to do research about food and other subjects to help make the Thai people live better. I also want our country to grow and become a developed country. My motto is 'work for the nation' and I think that if everyone has this motto in mind our country will be a powerful country."

"I WAS born in the province where there is not much progress and education. All of them are farmers and very poor. Most of them uneducated. Only a few of them get education, and not enough, therefore, they do not get good jobs. When they are sick, they don't know what to do. They treat their illness by themselves. They don't have doctors to cure them because no one wants to work in the country. But I do. When I finish my study and begin to work, I will help and advise them in higher education because education is very important for their lives. I am very proud that I was born in the country because I may help them to progress."

"NOWADAYS the people in rural Thailand are mostly

poor. Doctors and hospitals are scarce in the country, so the farmers do not have good health. I am very sad when I see this condition. It makes me try to study hard and if I become a doctor, I will work in the country to help the Thai people who are poor. I hope they will be happy because of their good health and I will be happy because of their happiness."

"I'VE BEEN dreaming to be a doctor since I was a little girl. I know that being a doctor is not easy but I must endeavour to study hard and try my best. If I am a doctor, I will go upcountry to help those sick people. Most farmers upcountry are poor and I feel sorry for them, especially when they are ill. I really want to help them and see them recover from their illnesses. This is the most important reason why I want to work upcountry."

"LAST week, I went to a small village in the country. I saw many children, the majority of them were poor. They did not have clothes to wear. I felt sorry when I saw them. I conversed with their parents about learning and living. They told me that the children had to walk about six kilometres to school, because there was no school in the village. After school, they had to help their parents every day. One day I went to the school and talked to their teacher. He said that life was very difficult. Teachers didn't want to teach there..."

"I WAS born in Nong Khai Province. My father is a teacher. When I was seven years old, I first came to understand that the schools in villages are poor. While schools in Bangkok have many good things for students, the schools in the villages lack many things, especially teachers..."

"A FEW days ago my teacher told the class that she wanted our help in donating some books or old uniforms to poor students. She said that she had a friend teaching students in the rural area. In fact, the students do not have enough books to learn from. Sometimes one text book has to be shared among three or more than that. So even with uniforms. She wrote to my teacher that she wanted anything that was useful for students: Books, pencils, etc. I thought how sad it is to be so poor..."

"I AM studying in MS 4 now. I want to tell you about someone I love very much. Do you know who she is? My

mother, she has four sons and four daughters. She is very small, but strong. She is a vendor. She works hard all day. Her income is little but she can make my three sisters get their degrees. She always tells me to study hard. She says she didn't want her children to work like her. I know I am not good in English, so I am writing this letter to you to tell you my story and to practise my English."

"MY family is poor. We don't have many possessions. There are eight members, counting my parents, in my family. I am the fifth. Although I am poor, I do not complain. I think that it will be better in the future. After I finish my education, I will help my family. There is something that I must tell you, the most valuable thing in my house is happiness which comes from my parents, my sisters and my brothers."

"NINETEEN years ago I was a little girl who lived in a rather small village in the North of Thailand. My parents were both farmers. My hobby was herding the cows or buffaloes in the fields with my friends. We were staring in wonder each time the tourists drove by in their cars. We looked at them like people from a strange star. But they were kind and waved their hands to us when they saw us. We smiled and waved hands whenever we saw them in the countryside. So I would like to say that the rural child is as friendly and innocent as any child in the world, perhaps even more."

"Dear Editor,

I AM learning in MS4 St Dominic School. My friends have a good plan to set up an Education Club. This club will be managed by 7-10 students. They must explain various subjects to members who do not understand their lessons. I think this plan is good because the members will understand every subject. If other schools have this plan, it will be useful for students."

"LAST Friday I joined the Young Speakers' Club. Nowadays English is very important and I think that this is a good beginning for everyone to practise not only speaking but also thinking and express their thoughts in English. To



be a good speaker one has to learn to be a reader and a listener first."

"I AM very proud because I was born in Esarn (Northeast of Thailand). People in other provinces always think that Esarn is poor and dreary but they forget that the people of Esarn have a generous heart. On top of this we are honest.

"Most people in Esarn are farmers. Farming is a trustworthy profession... There are the things the people of Esarn are proud of.

"I think if I ever have a chance to learn in a higher institution in Bangkok or abroad, I want to return to Esarn in order to make progress for Esarn..."

"MANY people believe that a civilised country is a country with high buildings, factories, cars and many entertainment places and they believe the people of that country are civilised people. What makes a man civilised? First, a civilised man must be broadminded. He may have his own idea, but he is willing to listen to other people's idea. He is not angry when other people disagree with him. A civilised people also respects law."

"1981 is the International Year of Disabled People. There are many disabled people in Thailand. They have to struggle and suffer in their lives. When I read the news about them, I feel pity for the plight of the disabled. I want all people to give their attention to the disabled. Many of the handicapped people in Thailand are helpless because no one is interested in them. The disabled people are not much different from the average person. They all seek love, understanding and security. The difference is that they are mentally or physically incomplete which prevents them from enjoying life. Instead of looking down on them, we should help and sympathise with them."

"I WILL tell you about my mother. Her name is Riam and she is 45 years old. She has a fair complexion and is very beautiful. She is a good housewife. She teaches me everything. So, my mother is my first teacher. My mother has a good temper. She loves me and I love her, too. She works hard every day, so when I have some free time, I always help her. When I finish M3 my mother hopes that I

will continue my study in M4 up to M6. I love my mother very much because she is a very good mother and my first teacher."

"WHEN I was a baby I had my parents to teach me everything. I love them very much. They brought me up in kindness. So my parents are my first teachers..."

"...SOME children live in Ban Rajavithee because their parents cannot take care of them. Why did their parents do this? Some children were left by their parents in various places. Now these lonely children have not enough food to eat. They sell newspapers and garlands in the street in order to earn some money for their food. It is very dangerous for the children to sell the newspapers and garlands in the street. I think we should help them. We should give some food and be kind to them."

"IF you go to Phayathai Babies Home, you will know that you are very lucky in life. Do you know why? Because you have your parents. There, the children don't have parents. They are orphans. You have your parents to give you love but they do not know who their parents are. You can run to your father or mother when you have problems but where will these children run to if they have their problems? If you want to help these children, you can go to visit them at their house which is called 'Phayathai Babies home.' You will feel pity for them. If you do something good for them, they will be very happy. I hope that you will go to visit them at Phayathai Babies Home soon."

"THUNG SONG is a district in Thailand. It is located in the south. The landscape is very beautiful. Thung Song is surrounded by mountains. The weather is cool and fresh. There are many old and beautiful customs. The young women of Thung Song have good manners and are beautiful. This makes this district famous in Thailand."

"I LIVE in Chiang Rai. It is in the northernmost part of Thailand. It is a beautiful and peaceful province which is surrounded by mountains. I love it very much and you will feel like me if you come to visit here because there aren't any problems like traffic jam and robbers. The people here are kind and friendly. If you have a problem or if you are in

trouble, they will help you even though you are a stranger. Here, you will see that young people respect and take good care of the old. Most of the people here earn an honest living. There are no robbers and beggars. It is also an interesting historical province...”

CHAPTER FIVE  
SOME FRUITS  
AND FLOWERS



## Durian: endurable or unendurable?

A few years ago in April, Bangkok suffered a severe rainstorm with high winds. One of the casualties of those winds was the row of outbuildings in the grounds of my (rented) house in a quiet soi off Sukhumvit Road. They were completely flattened — utterly demolished — when the giant banyan tree at the back of our house blew down.

Unaware of this (the telephone line had been dragged down together with all the electric power lines), I arrived home to be greeted by my wife with “The house has fallen down!” Just the thing to restore one’s spirits after a day’s work...

Fortunately, the main house itself was intact, albeit powerless. Even more mercifully, no one had been injured. But my in-laws’ personal belongings were dumped all over the place, and the lounge was in a dreadful mess.

And as luck would have it, that day someone had bought a durian, which was parked on the dining-room table.

A bit dazed by the wreckage all around, the thing that penetrated my consciousness most clearly of all was the smell of that durian. Fighting back incipient nausea, I asked my wife, “Do you think you could put that durian somewhere else, out of smelling range?” So she parked it inside her son Jiap’s Fiat, out in the driveway, and closed all the car’s windows.

Yet, such is the all-pervasiveness of the durian’s aroma, I could still smell the wretched thing...

They say that’s one of the advantages of durians: Expensive they may be, but it’s virtually impossible to steal a

durian and hide it — its smell gives it away immediately!

The durian is indeed a strange fruit. In spite of its smell, which has been compared (unfavourably!) to that of garbage, very over-ripe Camembert cheese, or decaying fish, it is one of the most coveted of all Thai fruit.

There are even tales of people getting into debt in order to buy one — for the prices are something fantastic. A durian may weigh from two to five kilogrammes and can cost anything up to 600 baht or maybe more.

A colleague in the office, an Englishman like myself, says when he first tried durians he didn't care for them much, but later they grew on him (if you see what I mean) and he came to be quite fond of them. Now he's gone off them again. His wife, who is Thai, however, got a craving for them during the later months of her pregnancy, the sort of "pregnancy-craving" common to women all the world over. It was just his bad luck that her craving was for durian; the poor fellow had to buy one every day for three months, and it cost him something like 4,500 baht! Fortunately for him, after his daughter was born his wife's craving duly ceased, and now she doesn't care much either way about durians.

I wish I could say the same for myself. Long years ago when I was new to Thailand, someone offered me a piece of durian "just to try." I was rather put off by the smell, so I tried holding my nose while biting into the creamy-yellow flesh.

Ugh!!! I rushed to the window, spat it out, and sank into a chair where, as far as I remember, I was finally brought round with smelling-salts... And in all the years since then, I've never dared try it again. Call me unadventurous if you like. I don't care.

For those who've never met a durian face to face, I should perhaps mention that they're dark green in colour, shaped something like a rugby football, and covered all over with very tough, sharp spikes. A Thai friend says if you're unlucky enough to drop a durian on your unshod foot, you're likely to end up in hospital (I didn't ask him if he spoke from personal experience!)

To get at the fruit, two deep lengthwise cuts are made with a very sharp knife, after which the segment of tough skin with its spikes and inch-thick pith is removed, exposing the



tender flesh inside — flesh whose flavour has been described by a Western writer as something like a very rich butter flavoured with almonds.

And for readers who may be wondering just why this fruit with its admittedly off-putting smell is so immensely popular and expensive as to be considered a luxury, something to be saved up for, looked forward to and prized, perhaps the Oxford Dictionary's definition may help:

"Durian: A Southeast Asian tree bearing a large oval fruit containing pulp noted for its fetid smell and agreeable taste." And there, perhaps, lies the answer. If one can overcome the Smell Barrier (which I haven't and probably never will) the taste is, they say, out of this world. (But, be it noted, several public places in Bangkok refuse admittance to the durian because of its smell).

Although durians grow wild in Indonesia, parts of the Philippines, Malaysia, Burma and Thailand, the cultivated durians of Thailand are universally agreed to be the best in the world. There's a growing export market for them too, especially in Hong Kong and Singapore. And as far as home consumption is concerned, durians are a multi-million baht business.

Some durian vendors can recite about 70 names of different varieties by heart (there are about 200 altogether). Probably the three most popular are the "Mon Tong" or "Golden Pillow," "Karn Yao" ("Long Stem") and "Chanee" or "Gibbon."

There are even specialist shops in Bangkok which sell only durians and nothing else, open only during the season (which is from April to June). They're rather like tailor's shops where one can order a durian flavoured and ripened to measure — almost like a suit of clothes.

Yes indeed— for some reason which I can't (or refuse to) understand, durians are big business in Thailand.

## Rambutans: the “hairy-tale” fruit

“The outward appearance of the ‘ngoh’ (rambutan) is ugly, but the fruit inside is beautiful. One should never be deceived by appearances.”

So wrote King Loet La Napalai (Rama II) in his “Ode to Fruit.” “Ngoh” is the Thai word for rambutan, a local fruit, oval in shape and about the size of a golf ball, whose crimson-coloured leathery skin is covered all over with soft, springy yellow-green hairs. The flesh inside is translucent pearly white, sweet and utterly delicious. Hence King Rama II’s very concise and apt description.

The word “rambutan” itself is not English, although you’ll find it in the Oxford Dictionary. It’s a Malay word, and not surprisingly it comes from the Malay for hair, “rambut.”

The Thai word, “ngoh”, is very difficult for most Westerners to pronounce; it’s like trying to say “not” with your mouth full of toffee! This word has a double meaning: Besides the fruit, it’s also the name of an aborigine race of people, Negritos, who live in the extreme South of Thailand and in Malaysia. The shared name “ngoh” is more than mere coincidence: Both kinds of “ngoh” — the people and the fruit — are dark-coloured and have curly hair.

The “ngoh” fruit is closely associated in Thai people’s minds with the story of Sang Thong, the Prince of the Golden Conch-Shell. This folktale, which just about every Thai man, woman and child seems to know, was also written by King Rama II — partly in prose and partly in the Thai verse form called “kloang”. But his version was in turn based on a much older legend handed down through many generations.

King Rama II’s epic is studied in Prathom 5 (the fifth primary grade) in all Thai schools, which explains why the story of Sang Thong is so widely known in this country. In

order to explain the connection between the story, the aborigines and the fruit, I must just tell you the rudiments now.

Sang Thong was a handsome prince who wore a magic “ngoh” mask over his head. This transformed his whole person, making him hairy, dark and ugly — just like the fruit and the “ngoh” aborigines.

However, the king’s youngest daughter in the story chose him as her husband because she was sure he was in reality very handsome and had a noble character. And one night after they were married, Sang Thong removed his “ngoh” mask and revealed his true handsome self to his delighted wife. (See Chapter Seven for the complete story).

Now although the “ngoh” in the story actually symbolises the aborigine people of Southern Thailand, it’s associated much more with the fruit, because everyone knows that the rambutan, like Sang Thong, is outwardly ugly but inwardly pure, beautiful — and good!

Rambutans or “ngoh” are very cheap and popular in Thailand and Malaysia. They’re in season from May to September but a lot are canned and therefore available all year round.

In 1980 Thailand exported some 500 tons of them, fresh and canned, worth nearly six million baht — mainly to Hong Kong, Singapore, the United States and Holland.

The delicious white flesh surrounds a rather large stone. Most Thais eat the “ngoh” in the simplest possible way — by biting into the skin, removing it, popping the whole fruit into the mouth and spitting out the stone. Another easy way is to split the skin open with both thumbs. In fact, spitting out the stone has given rise to another story.

Thailand’s most popular variety of rambutan is “ngoh rong-rian” or the “School rambutan.” The story goes that one day a schoolmaster in the South of Thailand was eating rambutans from neighbouring Penang where some of the most delicious varieties come from. As he ate, he tossed the stones into the school yard. One of the stones took root and grew into a huge tree (rambutan trees can grow 60 feet high) which cross-pollinated itself with a local variety.

From this one hybrid tree there grew further trees which eventually spread throughout Southern Thailand, all providing excellent fruit — and all from one school yard. Hence the name of the variety, “ngoh rong-rian.”

The trouble with the simple methods of eating “ngoh” by biting into the skin or splitting it open with the thumbs is that even if the flesh is what the Thais call “lon” (that is, if it comes away easily from the stone) a thin layer or husk of outer bark from the stone still remains clinging to the inside of the flesh. This causes a rough sensation on one’s tongue and throat. A typically elegant Thai technique is used to carve one’s way round this difficulty.

A small, delicately curved and very sharp knife is used — the same type as has been in use ever since the Ayutthaya Period by the “Ladies of the Inside” in the Royal Palace for intricate fruit and vegetable carving. With this knife, a cylindrical section is quickly and deftly cut out of the flesh, including the stone; this cylinder containing the stone is removed and thrown away, leaving a tunnel in the remaining flesh to be eaten. This part is therefore free not only of the stone but also of all the rough bark associated with it. This operation of cutting out the stone is called “kwahn.”

Rambutans which have been “cored” (or “kwahn’d”) in this way are tender and pure joy to eat. Naturally, only cored fruit is canned — sometimes with pineapple chunks embedded in the “tunnels” as an extra bonus, giving a blend of two separate flavours.

## G(r)owing bananas...

Whole volumes have been written on Thai bananas... Correction — what I meant was, whole volumes have been EATEN...

However, the subject is quite a weighty (and tasty) one. I've long been vaguely aware that there are many different varieties of banana in Thailand; but it was a letter from a reader of my book "Thai Ways" which finally drew my full attention to this topic.

The letter, in turn, led to another of those long "communication-gap" (but nevertheless fruitful!) conversations with my wife one evening, which continued during breakfast next morning.

The reader, an Englishman in Chiang Mai, wrote:

"I have recently bought your book 'Thai Ways' which I am at the moment reading. One thing puzzles me, however. You refer to columns made of 'carved banana-tree trunks.'

"If you have ever cut a banana tree, you will know it has no wood; in fact bananas are, botanically, not trees at all, but giant herbs. A carved banana trunk would not support anything, and would only last a day or two..."

The letter ended: "I don't know if you can help me in elucidating this. The reason I am writing is that I am trying to compile an account of the uses of Thai plants, and am drawing on as many sources as I can, including your articles. If you can throw any more light on this subject I should be most grateful."

The columns I referred to, "made of carved banana-tree trunks," were part of an "official" crematorium at a funeral ceremony, in which the "mock cremation" is held.

So... That evening after I received the letter, I asked my wife about it.

The Englishman was quite right, of course; the section of banana-tree trunk which my wife obligingly chopped in the

garden next morning and which I examined while my breakfast got cold, was rather like a cylindrical onion (or perhaps a leek) from which I could peel off layer after layer, leaving virtually nothing in the middle.

To go back to our conversation of the evening before. My wife said she thought the carved banana-trunks were probably stuck, nailed or tied onto columns made of actual wood. And the entire structure isn't meant to last longer than one day, anyway — the day of the cremation. (A friend tells me that the pillars are also sometimes decorated with carved pumpkins and turnips.)

It's several years since I originally wrote the article in the book; I can't remember whether this was just another of our usual "communication gaps," and whether I never knew the correct details. But as I referred to "banana-wood" a few lines further on, it rather looks that way.

What made our more recent evening's conversation so interesting was all the other things my wife told me about Thai bananas, or "gluey". It was almost like a miniature encyclopaedia article. She said every part of a banana plant can be put to good use. The leaves, known as "bai-tong", are used to make "krathongs" or little baskets for holding food and especially sweetmeats — and also the larger, more decorative variety floated on Loy Krathong Day.

The banana fruit is, of course, eaten; so too is the flower, known as "hua plee."

As for the trunk ("gahp gluey"), besides being used to decorate "official" crematoriums and other objects, very serviceable string can be made out of it. After peeling off a section of the onion-like (or leek-like) stem, a piece of wood (NOT a knife) is used to slit this gently and delicately into thin lengths which are then dried in the sun, and sold to vendors for tying up their customers' purchases.

The soft substance at the very centre of the stem is sometimes used for making curry. Opinions among Thais vary widely on whether this is tasty or not. In my correspondent's second letter he wrote that he asked a Thai friend about it and was told "If you like curried banana stem, it's 'aroy' (tasty); if you don't, it isn't." (Rather like durian, in fact!) This central part is also fed to pigs, and it's almost the

staple diet of pigs among the hilltribes, though it's mostly wild bananas which are used.

My wife mentioned three main varieties of banana. First, "gluey horm" ("Sweet-smelling banana"), the large variety identical with bananas as they are known in the West.

Next, "gluey nam wa" — little baby ones which are the most generally useful; their fruit contains the most vitamins, she says, and so it is often fed, mashed, to infants being weaned from the breast in upcountry areas. It was also probably this variety whose stems were used to decorate those crematorium pillars.

The third variety she mentioned was "gluey tanee." According to a world authority, this is one of two species growing wild in Thailand from which have come all the Thai cultivated varieties.

The fruit of "gluey tanee" is inedible because of its seeds, but its leaves make good "bai-tong." It's also well known through the legend of Nang Tanee, the spirit which dwells in its tree.

A few days after this banana-conversation (I know just what you're thinking...!) our office canteen was selling bunches of little yellow-skinned bananas. Seven baht for a huge bunch, and absolutely delicious.

On asking, I was told this variety is called "gluey kai" or "egg-banana." It's also made into a Thai dessert with syrup. However, my wife still says the other three she mentioned are the best known — especially "gluey nam wa."

My Thai-English dictionary lists eight varieties as examples. In his second letter my correspondent says he has recorded from various sources over 60 names for various sorts of Thai bananas, though sometimes more than one name is used for the same variety. He says N.W. Simmonds, the world authority on the subject, records 28 Thai varieties....

So there you are, banana-lovers. That's all I know.

P.S. I've just learn something more. A Thai colleague tells me that traditionally, beginners in Thai boxing classes have been taught to use their feet, knees, elbows etc by attacking a banana-tree as a sparring-partner! It's supple and resilient, "just like a punching-bag..."



## “Wahn” — the good-luck plant

More about plants. Not bananas this time; I'm writing about that rather mysterious, often fragrant plant (or more correctly, group of plants) so vastly popular in Thailand, with allegedly magic powers — the “wan” or “wahn.”

I'm going to spell it “wahn,” in the hope that it may give you a better idea of how to pronounce the word (in case you decide to buy one!) It rhymes with the English word “barn,” and has a *falling* tone, exactly like the Thai word for a house, “bahn” (which I usually and somewhat illogically spell “baan!”) Be careful to get the tone right when you're talking with Thai friends about these plants; if you say “wahn” in an ordinary tone, it means “yesterday,” and if you say it in a *rising* tone, it means “sweet!”

The reason I'm writing about this kind of plant, of which there seem to be umpteen varieties, is that my wife Laddawan has for some time been growing them assiduously in pots in the shady part of our garden outside the kitchen. In fact she's growing more than 40 different varieties of them.

So what exactly are “wahn”?

I have two definitions at hand. The official one given in So Sethaputra's Thai-English Dictionary says “a general name for sedges, flags, orchids, hemps and herbs, such as ‘wahn ngoo,’ the bowstring hemp, *genus Sansevieria*; ‘wahn dta-gror,’ the blood lily, *genus Haemanthus*; ‘wahn nam,’ the sweet flag, *Acorus calamus*; ‘wahn petchaheung or wahn hang chang’ (translated literally, those two names mean ‘tempest’ and ‘elephant's tail’) *an orchid of the genus Grammatophyllum*.”

A simpler and more enlightening definition has been given by my friend and colleague Normita Thongtham. In her regular column “Talking of plants” in the *Bankok Post* of

September 21, 1980, she wrote: “‘Wan is the collective name for plants believed to bring fortune to their owners.’”

Very well and succinctly put; it sums the whole thing up in a nutshell, and thank you, Normita, for kindly allowing me to refer to this and your two other articles on the same subject which appeared on October 5 and December 7, 1980. I'm sure many plant-lovers have clipped and kept these articles.

Now, I'm no botanist, that's for sure! (Though way back in England I used to grow strawberries moderately successfully, and the local bird population had a great time gorging themselves on my garden peas.)

What I'm interested in is just *why* my wife is growing all these “wahn” in pots, so lovingly and carefully. Nothing but the best, purest and richest soil is good enough for potting them. She doesn't use chemical fertilisers, as the plants don't seem to like them.

I knew about “wahn” some time before Normita's articles appeared; my wife has been waving various species under my nose and saying “doesn't this smell nice?” for well over a year now. And I must admit they do have the most bewitching fragrances. Basically, Laddawan is hoping to make some extra money by selling them, for as Normita correctly points out in her articles, they can fetch quite high prices. But there's also the ever-present element of superstition: They are good things to have about the house and garden, they do bring good luck.

Why, on the very day a friend gave my wife a “wahn” plant of the variety called “gwak Thongbai,” when I came home later, for some reason which now escapes me I gave her a present of several thousand baht!

Laddawan says “wahn” are supposed to bring good fortune in different ways. For instance, some kinds bring “chok lahp sirimongkol,” or good fortune and prosperity in general. Among many such kinds are “Gwak Maejan” and “saneh jan,” “Charm of the Moon” — of which, more in a minute.

If one eats the heart, stem, leaves or roots of other kinds, it's believed that this makes one “nang niao,” literally “sticky-skinned”; one becomes immune from wounding by any kind of weapon. One such variety is “gumarn thong”

("Golden Boy"), which should be eaten before entering any kind of fight. (Normita mentions a variety which may be the same; she writes that in the old days parts of it were eaten by some Thai boxers to make the skin tough, numb and resistant to pain — but it also makes the tongue stiff and renders one speechless for hours!)

Other varieties of "wahn" protect one's house against ghosts, fire and so on; they "kum-krong" or keep watch over the home, rather like guardian angels.

The variety known as "saneh jan" or "Charm of the Moon" comes in three different species — white, green and red. The different colouring is seen mainly in the tints of the stems and the undersides of the leaves. This variety seems to be Laddawan's favourite; it's said to bring general good fortune, as I mentioned above — and also to confer personal charm on its owner. (Well, I think it does, too — but perhaps that's only natural!) The fragrances of its leaves and stem, different for each of the three colours, are certainly delightfully exotic.

Since this variety, as its name indicates, derives its charm from the moon, the "wahn" textbook which my wife reads so diligently recommends that it be potted in the light of the full moon, and that later the pots be moved out to allow the plants to grow in the moonlight, on or near full-moon nights. This is said to promote their growth and improve their beneficial properties. And this is what Laddawan does.

She also occasionally lights joss-sticks in front of the plants and makes a wish. She does this after she has watered them in the daytime.

Another feature of some "wahn" varieties is their medicinal properties, such as conferring strength, long life and virility.

As I was writing this, my wife beckoned me outside the back door and showed me all sorts of features of her 40-odd "wahn" varieties growing in pots of all shapes and sizes — features which I would never notice on my own. And I couldn't possibly take in everything she told me, being unable to write shorthand in English, let alone a mixture of English and Thai!

One thing, however, I do remember: She showed me two specimens, growing in separate small bowls, the same thin-leaved variety of “wahn,” called “sedthi gorb sap” — “A Millionaire Amassing Wealth.” One plant is her own, the other belongs to her sister Sumalee.

The leaves on my wife’s plant have gradually curled — a sign of good luck, she says, because it symbolises the millionaire’s hands gathering all the money in! But the leaves on Sumalee’s plant have remained straight; they aren’t amassing any money.

In fact, if I understand my wife correctly, the leaves of a specimen of this variety may curl and uncurl more than once as it changes hands, depending on (or rather, *indicating*) the fortunes of its successive owners. (Thais say jokingly that it’s no use trying to change one’s luck by *making* the leaves curl artificially, as shop-assistants do with the ribbons when gift-wrapping a parcel — by drawing a knife-blade along them!)

However, I’m glad to say that Sumalee did have good luck recently: Her elder son got his first job, and a very nice one too. This piece of luck was foretold, says Laddawan, in a dream Sumalee had. She dreamt a “wahn saneh jan khao” (“Charm of the Moon,” white variety) which Laddawan had given her, had produced a great many flowers.

Another example of the mystic power of “wahn” plants, even in dreams, was when Laddawan dreamt some women offered her the stem of a “wahn” to eat, and she nibbled a little bit of it. Soon after she had that dream, she actually won 1,000 baht in the lottery!

My wife’s “wahn” textbook is in two volumes (in Thai, of course) with good clear colour photographs of several varieties. It’s called “Apiniharn Wahn Saksit” — “Miracle-power of the Sacred Wahn.”

All “wahn” are considered “saksit” — miraculous, efficacious, or holy; so we must never step over them or allow dogs or other pets to do so. We must always walk round them.

“Wahn” don’t like sunshine — which is why my wife grows hers in a cool, shady spot outside the back door. And only “clean” soil is used to pot them, such as ashes and

fresh soil dug from the fields, not stained with household refuse.

The variety known as "Gwak Maejan" is said to be much favoured by widows and widowers, because it's believed that when it flowers, its owner "has no need to sleep cold" — he or she will soon find a new marriage partner! And if a man owns the variety called "hah roi nang" ("500 women") it shows he's definitely a lady's man — a "butterfly" or flirt!

Normita refers to "Wahn Nang Gwak", to which she says the owner offers joss-sticks every morning (as Laddawan does to her beloved "saneh jan" or "Charm of the Moon" varieties). "Nang Gwak" is the "beckoning female spirit" who's supposed to attract money into the house.

Another variety which my wife also has is "wahn gai noi" or "look gai thong" — the "golden chick" fern, so called because the head of the stem looks like a newly hatched chick. It's even said that this plant gives out the sound of a chick crying!

There are also many unpopular varieties of "wahn" which are avoided for one reason or another.

"Wahn gra-seu" or "will-o'-the wisp wahn", for instance, is said to give out a phosphorescent light when it grows old and large. This brings its owner a bad reputation because people then say his house is haunted.

As I said, Laddawan's main aim in growing all these "wahn" plants is eventually to sell them and make her fortune. However, when friends come visiting and ask her to give them one of the plants as a favour, she finds it hard to say "no". Since she can sell each plant for several hundred baht (or so she believes), she really hopes not too many of her friends will come visiting!

How much, in fact, is a "wahn" plant worth? It depends on the variety, of course; on the size; and also on the number of leaves. "Bai la roi baht" — 100 baht a leaf — is a common way of reckoning the value of some kinds of "wahn" plants.

My wife says people go to Ayutthaya and buy up plants for 500 baht each, then bring them back to Bangkok where they may fetch as much as 2,000 baht a pair. She also mentions a case where a group of "kamoys" (burglars) stole nine "wahn" plants. The owner knew the gang, tracked them

down and called the police who arrested them and recovered the plants. Their total value was 5,000 baht.

When a "wahn" plant flowers, it's customary to tie a red ribbon or sash round the pot. This is equivalent (if I've understood my wife correctly) to a "rap kwan" or "tam kwan", which I think means simply "to restore one's spirits" — or maybe the "wahn's" spirits! I wouldn't know — and for once, my wife doesn't seem to know, either!

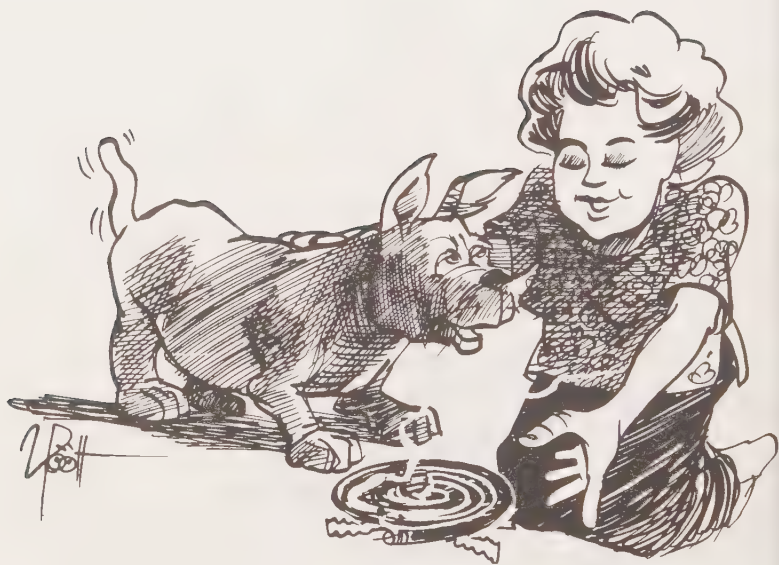
Ah, well, one can't know everything. I suppose... But I must say it's very pleasant to have the mingled fragrances — all rather strange and exotic — of those more than 40 varieties of "wahn" wafting around the house and garden.





# CHAPTER SIX

# ANIMALS



## Elephants

Once, in my early days in Bangkok in 1965, when I used to shoot 8mm colour movies of anything and everything unusual, I was riding in a taxi along Ploenchit Road — and there, just in front of us, was indeed a most unusual sight: A heavy-duty truck carrying a vast cage with a full-grown elephant inside. And as luck would have it, I'd left my camera at home! (Unlike my very first day in Bangkok, when I got a splendid shot of a herd of buffalo strolling down Rajdamri Road just in front of where Rajdamri Arcade stands today).

Thailand's elephants are, alas, becoming less in number every year, and are no longer nearly as common as they were even 30 years ago. Nevertheless, an occasional one may still be seen in Bangkok.

There's a Thai superstition that to walk under an elephant from one side to the other brings good luck; in particular, a pregnant woman who walks under the great beast's belly, will, it is believed, have an easy delivery. A few years ago a man and his elephant haunted the residential roads and sois in the Sukhumvit area for several weeks, cashing in on this superstition and doing a roaring trade at 12 baht a go!

The elephant has been Thailand's most important animal since time immemorial. Training and domestication of elephants has been practised in Thailand for at least a thousand years. In days gone by the elephant was used in battle, in ceremonies, as a symbol of wealth, a beast of burden and a working animal. It is still used for all these

purposes (except battle) today.

The elephant also plays a large part (literally, as well as figuratively!) in the nation's cultural heritage and legends. It appears in literature in the great national epic poem, the "Ramakien," and as the three-headed elephant, the "Erawan."

In his poem "The Legend of the Rose" King Rama VI describes the heroine's arms as moving "smoothly, like the dancing trunk of an elephant." The nation's favourite beast also appeared on the Thai flag until 1917 and is still to be seen on the Royal Thai Navy ensign.

It also occurs in thousands of temple decorations, in teak, jade and ivory carvings, in shadow puppets and in patterns on fabrics, bronzeware and silverware. Among the Karen hilltribe people, ownership of an elephant confers high prestige, including a special title.

The elephant plays a central role in many Thai State and other ceremonies, religious and secular. The Most Exalted Order of the White Elephant is one of Thailand's most honoured decorations, presented by His Majesty the King for outstanding service to the country.

Even the map of Thailand has been likened to an elephant's head with ears flapping, the Southern Peninsula being the trunk.

According to ancient Brahmanic belief, if a king possessed one or more of the exalted beasts known as "white" elephants, it was a glorious and happy sign for the success of the reign. The King never rode on a white elephant, and their sole purpose was to enhance the King's majesty; the more the white elephants in a reign, the more distinguished the King would be.

In the "Book on Elephant Science" the qualities to be looked for in a white elephant are defined: It must have seven colours on its body — white, yellow, green, red, black, purple, and steel-grey — white eyes, white nails (20 in all, two more than for ordinary elephants), white hair, a white tail, and white or steel-grey skin. A white elephant should also be fragrant-smelling and when asleep should not snore noisily but should emit the pleasant sounds of classical Thai musical instruments.

The first Thai king on record as possessing a white elephant was either King Ramkhamhaeng of the Sukhothai Period in the 13th Century AD, or King Trailok of Ayutthaya in the mid-15th Century. Later, King Mahachakrapat had as many as seven, and was known by his people as "Lord of the White Elephants."

Although a great and successful monarch, King Rama I of the present Chakri Dynasty had only two white elephants. The reign of his son, King Rama II, from 1809-1824, was more auspicious with four of the revered beasts. King Mongkut, Rama IV, was also well satisfied with the rather apt number of four white elephants presented to him.

All white elephants, once they have been proved to possess the right characteristics, are strictly Royal property, and the Elephant Maintenance Act of 1921 lays down that anyone finding a white elephant must offer it to the King, and will be compensated accordingly when the King accepts it.

His Majesty the present King has (at the time of writing) accepted and given rank and title to 10 white elephants, and is the process of accepting another two. The most recent, an 18-month-old female named "Phang Mod," was discovered and officially registered as a white elephant in August 1979.

White elephants must receive Royal treatment and be fed with only the choicest foods, so their upkeep is naturally very expensive. It's said that former Siamese kings who wanted to bring ruin on an enemy would sometimes make him a gift of one of these Royal beasts so costly to maintain. This is actually a myth; no Thai king has ever given away a white elephant. From this myth, however, has come the familiar English expression for any unproductive but expensive possession — a "white elephant"!

Thailand's history abounds in battles fought on elephant-back. Unlike their cousins the Royal "white" elephants, combat elephants were usually grey, very large and strong with extra long and pointed tusks.

The King or a general rode on the animal's neck carrying a sabre and directing his army's movements through his signaller who sat high up in a decorated howdah behind him, passing on the instructions by waving a pair of peacock feathers.

At the rear sat the steerer who controlled the beast's movements with a long pole at the end of which was a double-pronged hooked and pointed piece of metal. (A life-size model of a war elephant with its three riders in full battle array can be seen in Bangkok's National Museum).

In King Mahachakrapat's reign during the Ayutthaya Period from 1549-1569 nearly 300 elephants were caught and trained for warfare. In one sortie against the Burmese led by the King in 1549, his Queen, the legendary Suriyothai, fought beside him. She was well versed in elephant-craft and wore full warrior's dress. The King became engaged in mortal combat with a Burmese general, whereupon his brave Queen drove her elephant between them and was herself killed. Ever since, she has been revered as one of Thailand's greatest heroines.

Equally stirring was the bravery of King Naresuan the Great some 40 years later, again while fighting the Burmese. Surrounded by the enemy, he invited the Burmese Crown Prince to join in single combat, "so that our troops will see that brave deeds have not yet deserted princes, nor have they lost their skill." The Burmese Prince managed to hook his own beast's tusks into those of Naresuan's elephant, lifting it up into the air and sweeping with his sabre — but Naresuan ducked quick as a flash, and only the brim of his leather hat was sliced off in the shape of a crescent moon. After disengaging, the two beasts charged again... And this time it was Naresuan who swiftly and skilfully dispatched his opponent.

King Narai the Great, who reigned from 1656 to 1688, was a keen follower of the noble sport of elephant hunting. With his old friend Phra Petraja he loved to capture the great beasts for training by lassoing one of their hind legs — as is still done today, and can be seen every year at the Elephant Round-up at Surin during November.

King Rama I, founder of the present Chakri Dynasty, was like his royal predecessors a great enthusiast of elephant-craft. He had his sons and grandsons taught the noble art and one of them even obtained a doctorate in it.

As comparatively late as 1844 Prince Chesda Bodin, later to become King Rama III, fought a battle against the

Vietnamese in which he used a large number of combat elephants like modern tanks, following them up with infantry troops.

Less than 20 years later, in the peaceful reign of King Mongkut (Rama IV), when the King learnt that there were no elephants in the United States he wrote to the American President offering to send some for use as beasts of burden by the American people, and giving detailed directions for their safe transport by sea from Siam. President Lincoln replied that he appreciated most highly the King's suggestion, and would not hesitate to accept this generous offer were it not for the fact that the lowest latitude in the United States was not "such as to favour the multiplication of the elephant."

Thus the Thai people have always held the elephant in high and sentimental esteem. It is an intelligent, mild-mannered, easily trained and well disciplined animal. In the early days of the Chakri Dynasty all elephants belonged by law to the King. Later the Wild Elephant Protection Act of 1921 made it a protected species, with all wild elephants being the property of the Government.

In spite of this, it is sad to relate that today Thailand's elephant population, both wild and domesticated, is decreasing at an alarming rate. The number of domesticated elephants was estimated at only 4,000 in 1980 compared with over 13,000 in 1950; as for the wild species, its numbers have been "guesstimated" at between 2,600 and 4,500, and conservationists are warning of its complete extinction in less than 10 years.

But action is being taken. It is hoped that the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources will shortly be collaborating with the world Wildlife Fund in a rescue operation to save Thailand's wild elephants. The survey will use modern techniques such as the fixing of small radio transmitters to the female leader of each herd in order to find the herds' migratory patterns by locating the transmitters from low-flying aircraft.

Meanwhile, the training of elephants is just as much of a skilled art in Thailand today as it always has been. The Forest Industry Organisation runs a unique Young Elephant



Training School at Lampang. Here visitors are welcome to come and watch the morning's classroom and field work. Young elephants begin school at four or five years old, and during their four-year course they are taught to kneel, bend, pick things up, and manipulate (or rather "trunkipulate") huge teak logs.

At 10 years old, the "graduate" elephants are fully trained and ready to start a lifetime's willing but hard work — work which is vital to Thailand's timber industry among the valuable teak and other forests in the hills. The elephants' most productive years are between the ages of 16 and 42, but their accumulated experience — like that of us humans — continues to make them useful up to 60, when they are retired and many of them live on to 100.

Elephants suffer from the heat, so they work in the morning only. In northern Thailand they are given a long vacation in the hot season from March to May and are left to roam free in the jungle for mating.

The importance of an animal to a particular country often shows up in that country's proverbs — which explains why so many English proverbs are concerned with horses. So, as might be expected, Thai proverbs tend to be involved with elephants. For instance: "Riding an elephant to catch a grasshopper," clearly the equivalent of using a sledgehammer to crack a nut! "It's useless trying to hide a dead elephant under a lotus leaf" — because the leaf is much too small; in other words, "You may be sure your ill-deeds will find you out."

There doesn't seem to be any Western proverb which corresponds to this Thai one: "When inspecting an elephant, examine its tail; when inspecting your future wife, examine her mother!"

## Thai dogs

I can't explain it exactly, but there's definitely a certain "something" about Thai dogs. They're an important part of life in Thailand, and I've never written about them before. So here goes.

For a start, Thai dogs are the most human of any dogs I've ever known. It's not only intelligence that gleams in their eyes and shows in their behaviour; it's also a strong sense of humour and of the ridiculous. And almost every Thai dog I've known is very much of an individualist — in what I can only describe as a typically Thai way.

Over the years we've had a succession of Thai dogs, and most of them seem to have been perpetually bantering and exchanging witticisms with us.

We've also had "farang" dogs, but while they too are intelligent, their behaviour is somehow much more sedate and less colourful; it lacks the spiciness of their Thai cousins' mannerisms. Our Thai dogs have been — and still are — as varied a bunch of individualists as you could meet in any human gathering.

This strong trait of Thai canine individualism is summed up very well by my wife Laddawan: She says Thai dogs make lousy police dogs! The police have tried in the past to use their own native species, if only because they're considerably cheaper than Alsations; but from what I gather, with singular lack of success. This is not because of any lack in intelligence; Thai dogs are every bit as bright as Alsations. But they have far too strong a will of their own — they're just too plain "deu" or stubborn, and they'll be darned if they're going to do what they're told, just because some policeman gives them a command! No — it's their own life, and they're jolly well going to live it their own way!

My wife also tells me that Thai people give another

illustration of the average Thai dog's toughness and instinct for survival. They say that if you put a "farang" dog and a Thai dog on a desert island, the Thai dog will always be able to stay alive by foraging for food, while the "farang" one may not.

A Thai friend tells me that dog-meat is never eaten in Thailand — because Thais love dogs. My wife is no exception; she not only loves dogs, she has an almost uncanny understanding of their motives. All our dogs love her too, and demonstrate their devotion in a most abandoned and uninhibited fashion — especially when she says, "Come on, it's rice time!" (If she fails to say it when they think she should, they practically say it for her, giving all kinds of broad hints; Garfield the cartoon cat has nothing to teach our dogs!)

We used to have two tan-coloured half-brothers, Pepsi and Cola. Apart from their similar colouring, which they inherited from their common father, they were totally different. Pepsi was very tall and always wore a worried look, while Cola was short and squat — and very, very shortsighted. If ever a dog needed glasses, Cola did. This was one of the reasons why he always seemed grumpy; and indeed he was of a distinctly crusty disposition.

But Cola was a wonderful house-dog, loyal to all of us and particularly my wife and our maid. It was his shortsightedness that made him bark his head off at any and every visitor, friend and foe alike. (Actually we haven't had any foes, apart from a couple of very mild visits from kamoys or burglars who stole an empty gas-cylinder and a car radio; but to Cola, everyone outside the immediate family was always a potential foe.)

Cola used to lie on the mat by the front door, "protecting" the house against all comers, and would continue to do so even if some visitor (or invader, as he would consider them) had come in by the back way and hadn't been spotted and barked at.

Cola's love for his master — or should I say his mistress, my wife — was so strong that it made him jealous of Pepsi, whom he otherwise tolerated fairly well. This jealousy showed whenever Laddawan fondled Pepsi too much: for

Cola's liking, and a deep growl would be heard coming from Cola. My wife had to be careful to share her affections equally between them. Yet the two half-brothers slept side by side in peace every night, each keeping himself to himself.

When Laddawan's nephew Toang was a little boy and they were playing together, Toang sometimes hit her playfully, as children do. On these occasions Cola would likewise issue an official-sounding warning growl: "Just you stop that, young feller, or there'll be trouble!"

My wife has always washed all our dogs regularly, and kept them scrupulously clean. But as with all dogs, some of ours have taken more kindly to the bathing ritual than others — and Cola was definitely one of the others! He absolutely loathed being washed.

Laddawan always used to wear an old pair of bright orange shorts for this task, but one day she had to wear these orange shorts anyway, even though she wasn't going to wash the dogs that day — because all her other house-clothes were in the dirty linen basket. Cola, shotsighted though he was, was quick to spot the orange colour my wife was wearing. Scared stiff of the ordeal he thought was coming, he gave my wife an abject, ingratiating grin and a desperate pleading look, then slunk away to hide in the bushes...

One day my wife's son Jiap, then still a schoolboy who normally wore shorts, appeared on the verandah wearing his first pair of "grown-up" long trousers. You can guess what happened — Cola, with his acute myopia, naturally thought this was a stranger, an invader, and he was about to leap at Jiap and tear him to pieces. But Jiap quickly called out "Cola! Cola!" — just in time, and Cola recognised his voice and calmed down.

Pepsi was very tall and rangy, and I loved him dearly. He wore a permanently worried frown, which seemed to say "I *know* if I don't keep on scounging tidbits you'll let me *starve* to death!"

He seemed fond of me, too; each day when I came home from work he would greet me lovingly by rearing up on his hind legs, placing his two usually very dirty forepaws

squarely on my shoulders, and giving my face a thorough licking all over.

Like most Thai dogs, Pepsi was highly intelligent. Perhaps this was connected with the old Thai belief, often mentioned by my wife, that any dog with *five* claws on its back feet instead of the usual four is exceptionally intelligent. Anyway, Pepsi had those extra claws.

After Pepsi and Cola passed away we needed another dog. So a friend who is also a keen dog-lover and who often visits a temple where the monks care for literally hundreds of stray and orphan dogs, brought us a little white puppy from the temple. Rather unimaginatively, we called him Whitey.

Laddawan soon spotted that Whitey, like Pepsi before him, had the extra claw on his back feet; and he demonstrated his intelligence by answering to his new name only one day after we had given it to him. Sure enough, he has since grown up a highly intelligent dog with a delightful sense of humour.

In fact Whitey is one of the most lovable and comical dogs it has ever been my pleasure to know. When he was younger and rather smaller than he is now, he had a habit of standing up and balancing on his two hind legs; he did this, for instance, whenever there was the slightest hint of food on the table. At such times he looked more like a small white kangaroo than a dog. In those days too, besides having a heart of gold, he also had a taste for chewing up anything made of cloth, from table-napkins to clean shirts that had fallen off the washing-line.

Now that he's grown up, Whitey seems to have more or less given up this regrettable habit. But he still occasionally swims along the klong (canal) which passes through our garden into the neighbours' garden. There he steals the odd gardening shoe or old doormat, swims back with it and chews it contentedly on our lawn...

In fact Whitey has always been a keen swimmer, and when he was still quite small he discovered a simple way of getting out from the garden into the soi — by swimming across our duckpond and crawling underneath the fence. Of course, when he does this and we let him in again through the gate, he jumps up all over us, joyous and soaking wet,

and makes a proper mess of our clothes. And he's almost as tall as Pepsi was.

Ever since the huge banyan tree fell down in April 1980 in a storm and demolished our outbuildings, our ducks have had to sleep outside on the lawn, where they nestle under the tall "poottaraksa" or canna plants on the far side near the klong. Here, too, they lay their eggs.

My wife soon discovered that in order to make sure of getting the ducks' eggs, she has to reach their nesting-place before Whitey does — which means getting up at 4.30 a.m. every morning!

Whitey has the most affectionate nature imaginable. He washes my face diligently with loving licks, and also shows a lot of affection towards our two new puppies, whom I shall now describe.

My wife used to hear the most pathetic yelps and screams coming early every morning from the garden next door. She finally went to investigate, and found the screams were coming from two tiny little black-and-white Thai puppies. They were screaming because the gardener's boy was beating them with a stick. And he was beating them for a quite understandable reason: They were chewing up and destroying his freshly-planted young tree saplings!

There seemed only one answer — to adopt the two puppies. And this my wife did. I came home from work one evening and my wife said "I've got something to show you." Outside the back door were these two identical, beautiful and appealing little pups. (Well, *almost* identical; one was male, the other female!) My wife asked me whether I'd mind if we kept them, and I said I'd be delighted.

So then she asked me to think of names for them. I decided they must have short, simple names, easy for Thais (and in particular, everyone in our household apart from me) to pronounce.

So I called them Tip and Top. My wife said, "Good — the female is Tip." I hadn't thought of that; of course, Tip (also spelt Thip) is always a female name, or part of one, in Thailand. (It means "Magic", as in the name Porntip, "magic blessings", or Thipmanee, "magic jewel.")

Tip and Top have grown since then — and Top has



become a bit taller and distinctly fatter than Tip. Although they're still puppies, these two are already a couple of real characters, complete clowns like most Thai dogs.

Top is still fond of chewing playfully at anything within his reach, such as one's hands and legs; but he's thoroughly good-natured, while his twin sister Tip is really affectionate and loving. Often when I'm lying in my deck-chair on the verandah clad only in shorts, there'll be a minor explosion as Tip leaps violently onto my lap, her tail whirling round like an aeroplane propeller, and snuggles down with a contented sort of squeaky grunt, more like a piglet than a dog. She then gives my hairy chest a vigorous licking; she seems to find it particularly tasty. Sometimes in a fit of enthusiastic affection she jabs her head violently at my face, sticking her nose in my eye, and repeats her convulsive licking.

Each of the two little dogs has its own characteristics. Tip, for instance, enjoys sitting on my wife's bicycle. Top seems to consider it his job to keep our duckpond and klong clean, and whenever he sees a floating coconut or palm leaf, he swims in and fetches it out in his mouth — and then has a happy time chewing it.

Like all puppies, Tip and Top play together a lot, but their special Thai sense of humour is always very evident; they behave as usual like a pair of clowns, squeaking and yapping away, each with one of the other's legs in its mouth.

Whitey is very fond of the two little ones, and often licks them in a most fatherly way.

Top has always been a keen swimmer, like Whitey. If we throw a stick into the middle of the duckpond, Top swims in to fetch it, and Tip jumps on his back for an energy-conserving ride. Each of them grabs a different end of the stick, and they swim back side by side with it. Then they scramble up onto dry land, and walk away side by side, still carrying the stick.

My wife says our dogs always know when she's dressed up to go out, and because she understands them so well and their way of expressing themselves she knows they are asking her to please come back quickly.

Now here are some anecdotes friends have told me about their own Thai dogs.



One Thai family used to have a hilltribe dog, sent as a present from friends in the North. It was a Meo dog and as usual with that breed it had no tail. Hilltribe dogs are used to the cooler upland climate, and usually can't survive in Bangkok's heat, but this dog was "grian" or short-haired, so it wasn't troubled by the weather. It found itself a nice cool place to sleep, underneath the water-tank in the garden.

It was very fierce and a good house-dog. My friends told me that this dog, like all their dogs, was much closer to their servants than to members of the family, all of whom are out at work all day, whereas the servants are always at home. In fact each day when members of the family come home from work, they get loudly barked at!

Another friend tells me she used to have two Thai dogs. One of them was so stubborn that it absolutely refused to submit to any form of training; so they took it to an upcountry village in Ratchaburi Province, where it soon became leader of all the village dogs!

Their other dog was squat and sturdy. His name was Bobo, and he barked fiercely at all comers — and all goers. Everyone was scared of Bobo — except "kamoy" (burglars); in that case it was the other way round — it was Bobo who was scared of the "kamoy."

An example was when a kamoy calmly climbed over the garden fence in broad daylight, in order to steal the washing off the line, as there didn't seem to be anyone about. My friend was in fact inside the house, and she saw it all happening; there was Bobo, a fatuous grin on his face, wagging his tail in a placatory manner and practically inviting the "kamoy" to help himself. My friend shouted at the man, who quickly took to his heels, and she then gave Bobo a lesson in how to bark at "kamoy."

But like most other Thai dogs, Bobo was highly intelligent. When he was told to do something, he always listened very carefully and gave his whole attention to what was being said. At the mere sound of his name, he would immediately sit down and await further orders.

Bobo knew he wasn't allowed in the living-room, but occasionally just for fun my friend's husband would try to tempt him in by calling "Come on, Bobo!" But Bobo refused

to play this little game; he knew very well that he wasn't allowed in — and that was that.

Bobo used to sleep in the back kitchen next to the maid's bedroom. He was provided with a mosquito coil to prevent him being bitten. One night the maid was woken up by scratching on the other side of the wall.

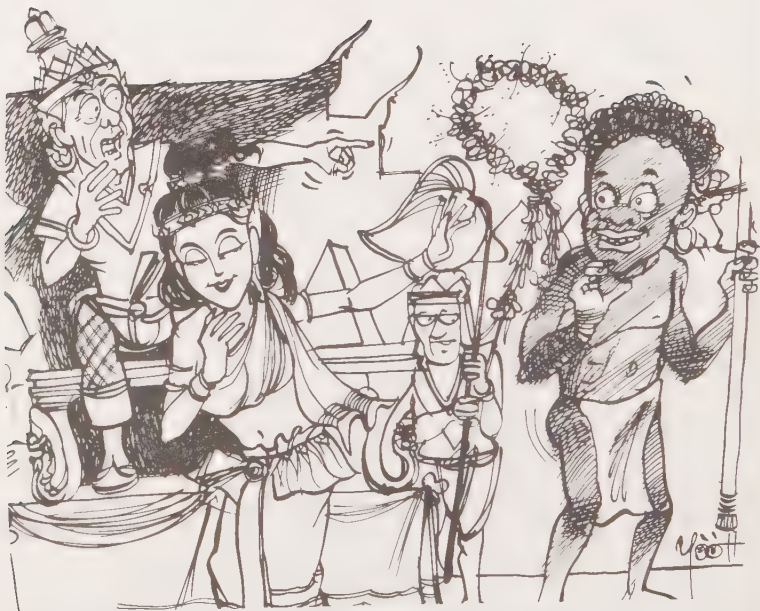
Alarmed, thinking it was more "kamoys" or at least rats, she got up to investigate. Going into the back kitchen, she found only Bobo, wide awake — and a burnt-out mosquito coil.

At first she didn't realise why Bobo had been scratching on the wall. Bobo looked at her, then at the remains of the coil, then at her again, and so on — until she finally got the message, and lit a fresh coil for Bobo.

From then on, whenever his coil burnt out, Bobo would repeat the scratching on the wall, and the maid would then get up and light a fresh coil. In the end they kept a spare coil permanently in Bobo's room. But my friend says they never managed to teach him to light it himself!

# CHAPTER SEVEN

# LEGENDS



*Nang Rochana threw the garland to Sang Thong, for in her heart she felt sure he was really very handsome and of noble character.*

## **An episode from the Ramakien: Torapa and Torapee**

This episode doesn't seem to be performed very often in public but is very well known to most Thais because they have learnt it at school. It is about two water buffaloes called Torapa and Torapee.

If those names seem confusingly similar, here's a tip to help you distinguish them when reading the story: Torapa is the father, Torapee the son. The one whose name ends in "pa" is the father!

The story as I shall tell it has been taken from a Thai-language school reader for Prathom 7, the highest primary school grade, corresponding to the 12-year-old age group. The verses in this book are the original ones composed by King Rama I; the translation is a joint effort by a Thai friend and myself. (To be more precise, my friend translated it verbally and I put it into the written form which follows.)

Before I start, I would like to repeat what I mentioned earlier: The beauty and poignancy of the classical Thai "klon" verses can only be fully appreciated by Thais themselves; and this is probably also true of the feelings aroused by the stories. In this story there is the feeling of warmth and love which the mother-buffalo Nila has for her baby, Torapee, as well as the loving care which the "thevadas" or guardian spirits show towards the baby buffalo. The friend who translated this story for me says the impression created on her when she was taught this story in class at the age of 12 was so strong that it still remains with her 15 years later, and will probably do so all her life.

Here then is the story.

The water buffalo Torapa had existed in a previous life as

a demon called Nontikan who was a guard in Phra Isuan's palace. (Phra Isuan is the Thai name for the Indian god Siva). One day Nontikan saw a beautiful palace maiden, Malee, and fell in love with her. He tried to caress her, but his advances made Malee very angry because being a celestial maiden she was high-caste, while Nontikan was a demon and therefore low-caste.

Malee complained about Nontikan to Phra Isuan, who, as punishment, condemned Nontikan to be reborn as the white buffalo Torapa. He furthermore decreed that Torapa's son would kill him, and only after this death would the curse be removed so that Torapa could be reborn again as Phra Isuan's guard.

Torapa was born in the forest of Himawan (the Himalayas). He had an evil disposition, and when he grew up he collected five thousand female buffaloes as his wives. Knowing about Phra Isuan's curse whereby he would be killed by his own son, every time one of Torapa's wives gave birth to a son he promptly killed the baby buffalo for his own protection.

But one day one of his wives, Nila, managed to escape from the herd when she was pregnant. She hid herself in a cave, where in due course she gave birth to her son, a black buffalo whom she named Torapee.

Tenderly and lovingly, Nila suckled and nurtured Torapee, and when he was old enough to understand, she told him why he had never seen his father. But she became afraid that the wicked, lustful Torapa would soon notice her absence from the herd and would become suspicious. So, sadly bidding her baby son Torapee farewell in the cave, she left him there and made her unwilling way back to the herd.

The six benevolent "thevadas" or guardian spirits of the cave felt an overwhelming pity for poor defenceless little Torapee, all alone with no one to take care of him. So they entered his body, thus endowing him with immense strength and power.

So Torapee grew up energetic and sturdy; unfortunately he also became aggressive, swaggering and overconfident. Maybe he inherited these bad traits from his father Torapa, although the story does not say so explicitly.

Torapee knew that his destiny was to seek out his father and kill him. But wisely, even cunningly, he waited until he could be sure he was big enough to do battle with Torapa.

The way he measured this is told charmingly in King Rama I's verses. Day after day while Torapee was growing up, he went outside the cave and searched for his father's hoofprints. Each day he measured his own hoof against the print of his father. At last came the day when his own hoofprints were as big as Torapa's. Torapee knew he was now big enough to fight — and kill — his father.

Torapee followed the trail of his father's hoofprints until he found Torapa himself. He said, "I'm your son. It has long been my intention to kill you. Now I shall do so!" And the two buffaloes, father and son, entered into mortal combat.

Skilfully Torapee jumped aside to dodge the old buffalo's mad rushes. After a while, Torapee changed tactics and locked horns with Torapa — very much as the bulls do in bullfights in southern Thailand.

Thanks to the hidden power of the six "thevadas" or guardian spirits inside Torapee's body, he was able to kill Torapa. He rejoiced in his victory and the fulfilment of his destiny, and the six spirits shared in his rejoicing.

But now Torapee's pride became overbearing. He actually challenged those six spirits, his protectors to whom he owed his very life, to do battle with him. The spirits, however, refused to fight against a common low-caste animal. At this point Torapee got so much above himself with pride that he rashly challenged the great and mighty god Phra Isuan himself.

As you may imagine, this was an extremely foolish action on Torapee's part. Phra Isuan was so angry at his effrontery that he immediately put a curse on Torapee, telling him he must now fight a powerful monkey called Palee, who would kill him. After that, Torapee would be reborn as the demon Mangkornkan, the nephew of the demon king Totsakan. Torapee's existence as a demon would only come to an end when, as Mangkornkan, he would meet his death from an arrow shot by Rama.

Torapee, under Phra Isuan's curse, made his way to the monkey-city of Keet Kin, where he challenged the monkey Palee to the pre-ordained fight. Neither animal could gain the upper hand, so at Palee's suggestion they went to a cave where in the narrow, confined space they would be able to come to closer grips with each other.

Before leaving for the cave, Palee told his brother Sukreep that if he, Palee, were killed, bright red blood would be seen



flowing out from the cave; but if Torapee were killed, the blood would be dark.

The two animals, buffalo and monkey, fought in the cave for seven days. Again, there was no decisive result. Finally Palee said to Torapee, "Your strength comes from the thevadas inside your body. I cannot win."

Palee reasoned this way because he knew that being a monkey, he was a higher form of animal than a buffalo — he could think and fight at the same time, while a buffalo (an ordinary buffalo, that is) could only do one thing at a time. Therefore Palee should have been able to vanquish Torapee; it was only the hidden power of the six spirits inside Torapee's body that was preventing this.

But Torapee answered "No! My strength is my own!"

This unbelievable ingratitude for all the help they had given him made the six protecting spirits so angry that they immediately left Torapee's body. As they did so, they created a luminous aura around the buffalo's body, so that Palee could see him much more clearly in the darkness of the cave. With one blow the monkey killed Torapee.

This point in the story is always impressed on Thai school children by their teachers. Ingratitude is always bad, and brings its own retribution. Children should love and respect their parents and all those who guard them.

The thevadas joyfully clapped their hands, which caused rain to fall. The rain diluted Torapee's dark blood, making it light red; and Sukreep and his fellow monkeys waiting outside the cave wept, for they thought it was Palee who had been killed.

At this point in the story, the verses in the school text-book from which this translation is taken come to an end. But before leaving the story of Torapa and Torapee, I'd like to mention that two incidents from it have become everyday Thai expressions: A son who defies his parents is called "look (child) Torapee;" and if a subordinate challenges his superior's position, this is called "measuring footprints."

## The Legend of Phraphum Chaotee

You'll see them everywhere in Bangkok and throughout Thailand. In the compounds of private houses, big hotels and office blocks, even petrol stations, as well as humble upcountry farm dwellings.

They are the beautiful little spirit houses set on raised platforms, often looking like sparkling miniature temples with intricate red-and-green tiled and tiered roofs and stately gilt "prangs" or spires, which serve as shrines for the spirit of the land on which the building stands — the "Phraphum Chaotee." The dictionary translates this as "the guardian spirit inhabiting a homestead."

My wife has a big and rather old book called "Prohma-chahat" or "The Life of Brahma." It's full of various fascinating items of Thai folklore, legends and the like, and one of these is called "The Legend of Phraphum Chaotee."

I asked a Thai friend if he would be kind enough to translate it for me, as I had tried myself and only managed as far as the introduction, after which the profusion of poetic and Pali words defeated me.

My friend confessed almost as much despair; in fact he frankly gave up on one or two passages. So I've condensed the results into something which I hope readers will find more or less intelligible — and interesting.

Here goes.

Once upon a time there lived a king named King Tossaraj, whose queen was Queen Santahtook, and who ruled over a kingdom called Krung Palee.

In due course they had nine sons. When these sons reached manhood they were highly gifted, so King Tossaraj decreed that they should rule over various places as follows.

1. Phra Chaimongkol was to rule over houses, other residences and buildings.

2. Phra Nakornrat was to rule over gates, military camps, outposts and ladders.

3. Phra Thepen, over animal enclosures.

4. Phra Chaisop, over provision stores, rice barns and other storage places.

5. Phra Khontan, over wedding premises and "reuan hor" or homes for newlyweds.

6. Phra Thammahora, over orchards, gardens and farms.

7. Phra Waiyatat or Phra Thevaten, over temples and places of worship.

8. Phra Thammamikkarat, over food grains and cereals.

9. Phra Tasthara, over swamps, canals, streams and ponds.

Later on in his reign, King Tossaraj fell into bad ways, abandoning the Ten Virtuous Principles of a Ruling Monarch and thereby creating great hardships for his people.

Learning of this trouble, the four-armed god Phra Narai came down to earth in the guise of a minor Brahmin and asked King Tossaraj to grant him a small residence where he could meditate in seclusion. Unaware of the Brahmin's real identity, the King gave his royal permission, and poured the Water of Royal Dedication from a gourd to signify his assent.

But the King's ill-intentioned counsellor, Phra Sukorn, realised that the Brahmin was actually Phra Narai in disguise, so he used his own magic powers to reduce himself to a very small size and entered the mouth of the gourd, blocking the flow of the Water of Dedication.

Phra Narai in turn knew what Phra Sukorn was up to, and pierced the mouth of the gourd with a blade of grass, hitting Phra Sukorn's eyes and forcing him to flee in pain.

Phra Narai then resumed his normal god-like form, after which he drove the evil-ruling King Tossaraj out of his kingdom of Krung Palee and into exile in the Himapan Forest. Here the ex-king suffered many hardships, including starvation.

Eventually the ex-king Tossaraj returned to Phra Narai to beg for his kingdom back. Phra Narai gave his permission, stipulating that henceforth anyone who wished to perform any auspicious ceremony must propitiate and pay homage

to Phra Phum with offerings beforehand, as Phra Phum owned the land. After making offerings and paying homage, there would be happiness and prosperity.

This, says the book, is the origin of the present tradition which has been handed down from generation to generation since ancient times: "Learned persons please judge it according to your own opinion."

The book then goes on to specify details of when and when not to set up spirit houses according to the lunar days and months; I won't go into these details, since anyone wishing to set up a spirit house always consults an astrologer about them anyway.

## **Sang Thong, Prince of the Golden Conch Shell**

The hairy-skinned rambutan fruit is associated in the mind of nearly every Thai with the legend of Sang Thong.

This centuries-old Thai folk tale, in the version written by King Rama II partly in prose and partly in the Thai verse form called "Kloang", is studied by all Thai schoolchildren in Prathom 5, the fifth primary grade, throughout the land.

There once lived a king named Tao Yosa Wimon. ("Tao" or "Thao" is an old Thai word meaning a king). He had two wives, Nang Chan Thevi (usually just called Chan) and Nang Chantha.

Nang Chantha bore the king a daughter. Later, the king dreamt he would have a son who would become very powerful and a challenge to the throne.

Hearing about this dream, Nang Chantha became jealous, for she saw that if the dream came true the son would become the king's heir and her own daughter would be disinherited. Nang Chantha therefore persuaded the court astrologer to tell the king that should he ever beget a son, that son would have an evil nature and the king should immediately get rid of him.

Not long afterwards the king's other wife Nang Chan bore the king a son, who emerged from her womb encased in a conch seashell. This was extremely embarrassing for the king and Nang Chan; moreover, it gave the court astrologer the perfect excuse he needed. "I told Your Majesty that if you had a son he would be evil," he said. "And what could be a worse omen than a son born inside a seashell?"

So Nang Chan and her infant son, still inside the conch shell, were banished. They went to live with an elderly couple in a hovel in the forest. Here every day Nang Chan

helped the old couple by chopping wood and going out to find food. She did all the cooking, and planted a vegetable garden outside the hut. And all the while, her son whom she had named "Sang" meaning a seashell, remained inside his shell.

But one day when the child was five years old, while Nang Chan and the old couple were out of the hovel, Sang at last emerged from the shell. Looking around him, he decided to help his mother by doing some of the housework and chasing away the wild chickens which were eating the cooked rice Nang Chan had put outside to dry. Afterwards he went back inside his shell again.

When Nang Chan returned and found the house spick and span, she wondered who was responsible. So next day she pretended to leave the hut, but instead hid herself so that she could see what went on inside. To her utter astonishment she saw Sang come out of his shell and start tidying the hut. This was the very first time she had ever set eyes on her son. Wanting him to be a normal boy like other children, she destroyed the shell, and from then on Sang lived the life of an ordinary child.

Tao Yosa Wimon soon heard the news about his son, and remembered with foreboding his dream and the astrologer's warning. So he sent soldiers into the forest to do away with Sang. When the little boy was all alone in the hut, the soldiers took him away. Sang wept bitterly for his mother, but the soldiers told him not to worry; they said that if he went to sleep they would take him back to the hovel.

However, when Sang did fall asleep the soldiers tried to carry out the king's orders; but Sang woke up and pleaded for his life. The kindly men were also in tears, but they knew they had to obey the king's command. But when they tried to stab the boy with knives and spears, one by one the weapons broke without harming him. So they took him to the king.

Sang did not yet know who his father was, and he told the king about his mother Nang Chan and how the soldiers had tried to kill him. The king's own eyes filled with pity, but his second wife Nang Chantha was quick to notice this, and she cast a spell on the king so that he forgot his own identity and

ordered Sang to be drowned.

But once again Sang's life was saved, this time by a female Naga (a sea-serpent goddess) who took care of the little boy. The Naga decided to send him to live with a giantess called Nang Panturat. So she put Sang in a boat with enough food for the journey and a note forbidding anyone to harm him. Then she sent the boat on its way with a gust of wind.

When Nang Panturat saw the boat approaching she decided to befriend little Sang, although this was against the advice of her astrologer. She ordered her servants to put on their most elegant clothes and greet the little boy. The servants brought him to Nang Panturat's castle, and he lived there for the next ten years.

One day the giantess went on a hunting trip. She warned Sang not to go near either of the two wells which stood one on the left and the other on the right of the castle.

But Sang was secretly curious, and he found the left-hand well contained liquid silver and the right-hand one liquid gold. He dipped his finger in each well in turn, but when he tried to wipe the silver and gold stains off his finger he found he couldn't. So he bound a piece of cloth round his finger, and told his servant he had cut it.

Then he returned to the castle where he found in an attic a pair of glass shoes, a gold cane, and the magic "ngoh" mask which changed his whole appearance, making him ugly all over. Putting on the shoes, he was delighted to find he could fly.

He also realised that his foster-mother was a giantess, so he decided to leave her. One night he crept out to the well of liquid gold and immersed his whole body in it to make himself beautiful.

It's from this point onwards in the story that he is sometimes known as "Sang Thong" rather than just plain "Sang" which means a seashell. "Thong" means "gold."

Then he picked up the gold cane, put on the magic glass shoes and the "ngoh" mask, and flew away. The mask changed his whole appearance, making not only his face but also his body look ugly and hairy like the rough hairy crimson skin of a "ngoh" or rambutan fruit.



When Nang Panturat found that her foster-son had escaped with her magic shoes and mask, she tried to follow him to the top of a high mountain where he had landed. But Sang Thong begged his own mother's spirit for protection, and this prevented the giantess from reaching him. She called to Sang Thong to come down, but he refused. Because of this, Nang Panturat died of grief.

Sang Thong arranged her funeral, and then flew off to a distant land ruled by Tao (King) Sa-mon. Here he settled down to live at the edge of a forest.

Tao Sa-mon had seven beautiful daughters, and he wanted to marry them off. The first six were able to find husbands to their liking — handsome young kings in their own right, all of them. But the youngest daughter, Nang Rochana, was much harder to please. She rejected every suitor presented to her.

So Tao Sa-mon summoned every unmarried man in the kingdom — including the ugly-looking Sang Thong. The king told Nang Rochana to choose a husband by throwing a flower-garland to the man she favoured.

To everyone's amazement (though perhaps not to yours!) Nang Rochana threw the garland to Sang Thong, for she was able to see his true golden form, and was sure he was really very handsome and of noble character.

But her six handsome brothers-in-law jeered at Sang Thong for his ugliness. As for the king, he was furious; for not only did the "ngoh" mask make Sang Thong look revoltingly ugly, but he also appeared to be a person of low rank. So Sang Thong and Rochana were banished and went to live in the forest.

One night Sang Thong removed his "ngoh" mask and revealed his real, handsome shining gold self to his wife. Nang Rochana was overjoyed to find her instinct had been right. Moreover, Sang Thong told her he was in fact a prince. Rochana tried to burn the costume, but it wouldn't burn, and Sang Thong wouldn't take it off at all after that. This made Rochana very unhappy.

But Tao Sa-mon wanted Sang Thong to test his prowess against his six brothers-in-law. He ordered all seven young men to go fishing, saying each man must bring him a

hundred fish. Any man who failed to catch a fish would be put to death.

Sang Thong put on the magic glass shoes and flew off to a spot on the river bank near where he knew the other six would be fishing. He sat down under a large banyan tree and took off his "ngoh" mask. He then chanted a magic spell which brought all those fish in the river which were fated by their karma to die anyway, swimming towards him. The other six sons-in-law were unable to catch even a single fish, for all the fish were swimming round the area where Sang Thong was sitting.

When the six young men approached Sang Thong, none of them recognised him without his "ngoh" mask on; they felt sure this handsome young man who had attracted all the fish must be a god. They begged him to give them some fish, otherwise they would lose their lives, and promised him anything he asked for in return. Sang Thong asked them all to chop off the ends of their noses and give them to him.

The six men had no choice, and in return for their chopped-off nose tips Sang Thong gave each man just two fish. On their return to the palace the six were very embarrassed by their truncated noses and paltry offerings of two fish. Sang Thong, meanwhile, produced a hundred fish as stipulated.

The king angrily ordered another contest. Each man was to bring him the carcass of a deer, again on pain of death. Everything happened exactly as with the fish, but this time Sang Thong demanded a portion of each man's ear. Each of his brothers-in-law was able to give the king only one carcass, against Sang Thong's twenty carcasses.

I've condensed this story considerably; in the primary-school textbook it takes up nearly fifty pages. In the final episode, the god Indra saw that Sang Thong must get rid of his "ngoh" mask for good, and settle down to a normal human life, because Rochana was so unhappy about his "ngoh" costume. Indra therefore challenged Tao Sa-mon and all his sons-in-law to a game of "kli" or polo, with the kingdom as prize. The six sons-in-law were powerless, so the king begged Sang Thong to come to the rescue. Sang Thong agreed on condition he was given a complete set of

new royal robes. When he had put these on, he looked so magnificent that no one, not even the king, recognised him. Sang Thong won the game.

On learning who Sang Thong really was — that he was indeed the son of Tao Yosa Wimon — Tao Sa-mon was overjoyed.

Sang was also reunited with his mother, Nang Chan, in a typically Thai fashion. She came to the palace disguised as a cook, and carved the story of Sang's early life on pieces of marrow which she made into a soup and gave to him, so that he knew who she was.

Although this story is deeply loved and firmly embedded in Thai culture, I for one can't help noticing its resemblance in many ways to the fairy-tales I learnt when I was a child. If I were an anthropologist, or a folklore expert, perhaps I could say more about the universal human ideas and ideals that have given origin to such tales. But I'm not — so I can't.

All I can tell you in conclusion is that in this story from that time on, as in all fairy tales, everyone lived happily ever after.

## Axe-identally

This story is mainly about axes (the kind used for chopping down trees, not for plotting mathematical graphs).

Actually — I mean, actually — it all began when I was talking to a salesgirl in a bookshop. She said why didn't I write about "theparak"? She began telling me a story about it in Thai, which I couldn't follow. I asked her to tell me in English, and I couldn't understand that, either. The whole thing was a bit disjointed because the shop was full of people, and she kept having to break off in the middle to serve customers.

I asked her if she could write the story down for me some time, but she said she had no free time; even her weekly day off was always crowded, and she never had a minute to herself. A pity; it sounded an interesting story. It was something to do with "theparak" being twin guardians of the entrance to a house, I think; and I believe soldiers came into it, too.

Of course, I asked my wife about it when I got home. She was a bit vague too, but she told me "theparak" meant the spirits who live in trees. The dictionary wasn't much help either. It just says "guardian spirit" — which is more or less obvious from the Thai spelling, "theparaks" with a silencing mark over the "s". "Thep" is a god, spirit or angel (as in Krung Thep, City of Angels) and "raksa" means "to take care of."

I reminded my wife that some years ago she had told me about the old Thai belief that before chopping down any tree, a woodcutter must first ask permission to do so from the "theparak" inhabiting that particular tree. He did this by leaning his axe against the tree and leaving it there overnight. If the axe were still in the same position next morning, this meant the "theparak" was agreeable to the tree being felled; but if the axe had fallen down on the

ground, this meant “no”. Either that, or the other way round — my wife can’t remember!

After that, I was talking to another young Thai lady, an office colleague. She told me a charming little story about a “theparak”. Here it is.

There once lived in a village a woodcutter who was poor but very honest. One day he went to the forest as usual, and began to chop down a tree at the edge of a pond.

Suddenly the axe slipped from his hand and fell into the pond. The woodcutter was very upset; he couldn’t swim, and losing his axe meant the loss of his very livelihood. He began weeping.

The “theparak” came out of the tree in the guise of an ordinary villager, and asked the woodcutter what the trouble was. On learning the reason, the “theparak” said he would help. Diving into the pond, the “theparak” emerged holding an axe of shining silver. “Is this your axe?” he asked the woodcutter. “No, that’s not mine!” the honest fellow answered.

The “theparak” dived in again and this time came out with an axe of pure solid gold. Again he asked the woodcutter if this was his axe, and again the the woodcutter said “no”.

The third time, the “theparak” came out of the water with the woodcutter’s wood-and-metal axe. “That’s my axe!” said the woodcutter.

The “theparak” now revealed his true spirit form to the woodcutter. “You are a very honest man,” he told him, and as a reward for his honesty the “theparak” presented him with all three axes.

Overjoyed, the woodcutter went back to the villager and proudly showed his valuable new possessions to all his neighbours.

The next day another woodcutter from the same village went to the same tree, and deliberately let his axe fall into the pond. The “theparak” again appeared disguised as a villager, dived into the water and came up with a silver axe. “Is this your axe?” he asked, and the dishonest woodcutter said “Yes, that’s mine!” Whereupon the “theparak” gave it to him. When the “theparak” dived in a second time and brought out a gold axe, the woodcutter claimed that too; and

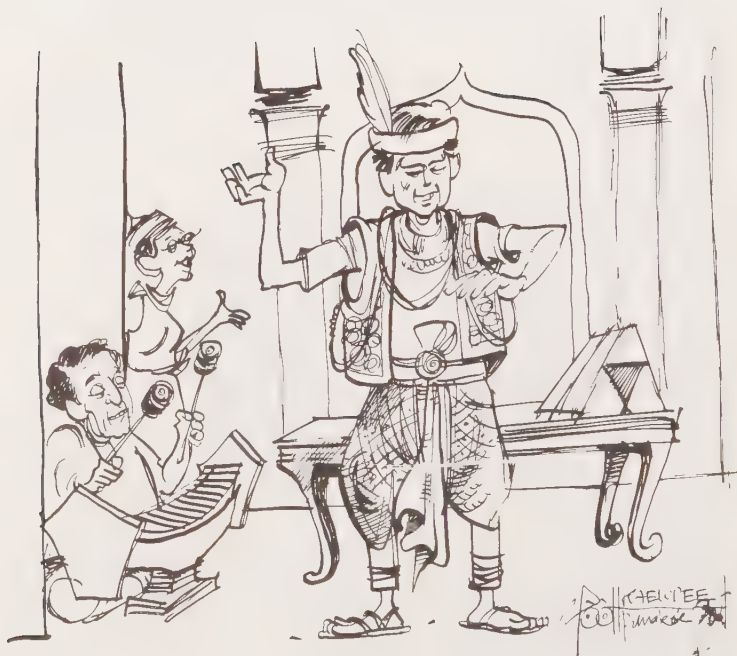
he also claimed his own axe when the “theparak” fished that out.

You’re a very dishonest man!” said the “theparak”, revealing himself; and as punishment for this dishonesty, the spirit took away all three axes.

Moral: Honesty is the best policy in the timber business.

**CHAPTER EIGHT**  
**THAI DRAMA**  
**AND DANCE**





## The “khon”

Various kinds of traditional Thai drama and dance were revived after the Ayutthaya Period by the Chakri Kings, and owe much to them — especially Kings Rama I, II and VI (King Vajiravudh).

Here is what I know about the “khon” or masked drama, which dates back to Ayutthaya times and is believed to have originated about 400 years ago.

This particular art-form is used *only* to perform episodes from the “Ramakien” (and very, very occasionally for one other story, “Unaruth”). The “Ramakien” story is known to every Thai and considered one of the peaks of Thai culture and dramatic art.

According to the attractive desk-calendar produced by the Siam Commercial Bank for 1981, the “khon” (pronounced “cone” with a *rising* tone!) developed through a gradual refinement of the ancient Thai arts of the theatre such as the “nang yai” or shadow-play and “grabee-grabong”, which the dictionary gives as “a fencing contest with swords, clubs or other weapons.”

Over hundreds of years these various forms of stage performance were improved, and out of them evolved the “khon” which today is considered a major symbol of Thailand.

According to the same desk-calendar, in earlier days all the players in a “khon” performance wore masks covering the whole face, called “hua khon”. The only exceptions were the comic characters, whose masks covered only the

back and top of the head, with the face exposed so that they could tell jokes; all the other characters could neither speak nor sing because of their completely masked face. Instead, they danced in rhythm with the music and singing from the orchestra, their hand and body movements taking the place of speech, as is done today, with the narrators in the orchestra telling the story.

Today the "khon" has changed somewhat; only the giants, monkeys and other animal-characters still wear masks. The "thevadas" or gods, as well as human characters both male and female, wear only headdresses called "chada." But even so, they never talk or sing.

The "khon" masks are very beautiful and elaborate. The making of these masks calls for specialised and expert skills, and all sorts of materials such as lacquer, silver, sea-shells, coloured glass and gold leaf are used.

A Thai friend of mine says the different facial expressions on the masks of the various characters in the "Ramakien" story are particularly interesting. The combination of the colour of the face, the shape of the eyes and mouth and the type of headdress serves to identify each character — especially the monkeys and demons.

As for the "Ramakien" itself, it is ultimately derived from the ancient Indian epic "Ramayana" written by the poet Valmiki about 2,300 years ago.

The story describes the birth of Rama in the kingdom of Ayodhya (correct spelling!), his marriage to Sita (Sida in Thai), the latter's abduction by Ravana or Totsagan to Longka (Sri Lanka), Rama's long struggle to regain her and his ultimate victory over Totsagan.

King Rama I of the present Chakri Dynasty rewrote the first Thai version of the "Ramakien" and it was later partly adapted and rewritten again in classical verse by his son King Rama II. Although the "Ramakien" is effectively the only story ever performed nowadays as a "khon", the converse is certainly not true. Carefully chosen "Ramakien" episodes (there are 138 altogether) are learnt by every child as part of the official secondary school curriculum; they are also performed in other Thai dramatic forms such as shadow-puppetry and so on.

Pictorially and decoratively, "Ramakien" episodes are seen throughout Thailand as mural paintings, wood-carvings, folk-tales, music, songs and many other art-forms.

If you see a Thai classical dance performance in a hotel or restaurant, it's an even chance that it will be an episode, or part of an episode, from the "Ramakien" — the story known to every Thai.

## Relationships between different drama forms

I've been trying, perhaps rather rashly for a non-Thai and non-expert, to piece together what I've learnt (mainly from books) about Thai drama and dance during the Rattanakosin era (though the history of many of these art forms goes back much earlier).

The task has proved much bigger and more difficult than I thought; however, it seemed a nice idea during Rattanakosin year (1982), and it was also partly a minor research exercise for my own benefit, to try to clear up some of my muddled ideas on the subject.

The questions to which I've been trying to find the answers were: What are (or were) the basic relationships (a) between the different drama forms such as the khon, the various kinds of lakhon, the likay, the manohra, and the shadow-play; and (b) between Thai *dance-drama* and Thai classical *dance* "*per se*" — if, indeed, the two can be separated.

For this purpose I took the advice of friends and borrowed three books from the Siam Society's library: "The Siamese Theatre" edited by Dr Mattani Rutnin (1975); "The Khon and Lakon" by Dhanit Yupho (1962); and "Souvenir of Siam" edited by Jaivid Rangthong (1954). I also talked to that very knowledgeable man, my friend Ayumongol.

Two short sections from the prefaces of the first two books tell one quite a lot. Dr Mattani writes: "The theatre and dramatic literature have always been, and still are, the keystones of our society. They are spontaneous artistic expressions of our people, reflecting the complexities of our way of life and thinking. Beneath the elaborate dance costumes, or intricately carved puppets, are satirical portray-

als of our different social groups, ideals towards which we aspire, reflections of the alternate suffering and happiness of our lives...”

And Dhanit Yupho, formerly Director General of the Fine Arts Department, writes: “The arts of dancing and music are inherent to the Thai people in general, but originally these arts in their classic form were under the patronage of the Kings, royalty and noblemen. The troupes of dancers and musicians were privately owned or supported and performances were given only in the palaces or aristocratic houses... In the reign of King Rama VI and under his personal charge, Thai dancing and music reached the zenith of its development and success. After his reign the court kept only a few artists to perform at royal functions...”

“In 1932 the Fine Arts Department was re-established and from 1934 on it was the duty and pleasure of the public and the Government to support the Thai art of music and drama once reserved for the nobility.”

Since then the Fine Arts Department has revived and kept alive the old traditional forms through the School of Dramatic Art which continues to train children in the skills handed down by the masters of old.

Thai drama proper can be classified under two main headings — the “khon” (pronounced “cone”) or masked dance-drama, and the “lakhon” (pronounced “la-corn”) which has the more general meaning of a stage performance, play or drama, and has developed into several different forms; I found seven in my literary researches — lakhon nai, lakhon nork, lakhon talok, lakhon chatri, lakhon deukdamban, lakhon rong and lakhon phanthang.

One point to bear in mind is that most of these — and the Thai shadow-plays and puppet performances too — differ from the normal Western play because *the audience already knows the story!* The interest lies in the dancing, posturing, costumes, music and so on.

The first item in Dr Mattani’s book is a very clear explanation called “Notes on the Siamese theatre” originally written by King Rama VI in 1911 and published with an introduction by Prince Dhaninivat in the Siam Society’s Journal in 1967.

On the similarities between the two main forms, the “khon” and the “lakhon”, His Majesty wrote that both are very ancient, and the theatre where both are performed was very simple, with neither stage nor scenery and very little stage furniture. The chief requirement is a clear space where the dances and actions can be performed, with a wide bench at either side to form thrones for the chief characters. (Today, however, the National Theatre has elaborate scenery, though this is a relatively new feature).

Costumes and props such as weapons and chariots are however very elaborate; the costumes are made to resemble those worn in theatrical shows in Siam in olden times, and have not been changed because they have been found most picturesque and suitable.

In both “khon” and “lakhon”, demons, monkeys and other animals wear easily recognised masks.

The music is very important and rather strictly bound by tradition. Standard “action tunes” tell the actor what movements he is supposed to execute — there are a “walking tune” (in fact, several variations; depending on who’s walking, adds Ayumongol), a “marching tune,” a “laughing tune,” a “weeping tune,” an “anger tune” and so on.

Songs are not usually sung by the actors themselves, wrote His Majesty, as it is practically impossible to sing and do the elaborate dances and posturing at the same time; so the songs are sung by a troupe of singers.

King Rama VI then turned to the essential differences between the two basic forms; he wrote that in the khon practically *all* the actors except those playing female parts wore distinctive masks (nowadays *only* demons and monkeys do so), and all the parts are usually played by men.

Dancing and posturing in the khon require the use of the whole body and a great deal of muscular exertion. Because of this, and the masks, the actors can neither sing nor speak, so the lines are spoken by a chorus.

In the lakhon, masks are confined to the rare demons, monkeys or other non-humans. Both men and women may take part, though usually not together; and grace rather than strenuousness characterises their movements, with hands



and arms being used more than legs. The khon emphasises strenuous virility, the lakhon grace of action.

The lakhon may be called a singing drama, but the singing is done by a choir; the actors may, however, speak certain lines themselves. Another big difference is that the "khon" is almost *only* used for performing episodes from the "Ramakien," while the various types of lakhon tell other well known stories.

Here are some more details about the lakhon, which according to the dictionary has the general meaning of a stage performance, play or drama.

I'll try and present as coherent an account as possible, although slightly bemused by reading three books. My friend Ayumongol has helped to make things a bit clearer in the course of an hour's conversation which should really have lasted three weeks or so to sort everything out properly. If those more knowledgeable than I am find mistakes, please forgive me.

In his book "The Khon and Lakhon" (1962), Dhanit Yupho, then Director General of the Fine Arts Department, says it is possible to divide the lakhon into three *major* categories: lakhon chatrī, lakhon nork, and lakhon nai.

The lakhon chatrī was originally acted entirely by men, mainly in the South of Thailand and especially at Nakhon Si Thammarat. From what I can gather, not only from Dhanit Yupho's book but also from other sources, the lakhon chatrī shared a common origin with another type of drama now totally different, called the manohra or nora because it originally presented the story of Manohra, the beautiful "kinnaree", half-bird, half woman. Although they are quite different today, the southern manohra and the central Thai lakhon chatrī seem to be interwoven historically, as will be evident from what follows.

According to Henry D. Ginsburg's article on the manohra in Dr Mattani's book, during the last century many southern manohra troupes came to Bangkok to settle down and perform lakhon chatrī; a chatrī performance was apparently one of the entertainments at the funeral of King Rama I's father.

Recently the southern manohra has changed almost

beyond recognition, influenced by the modern “look-toong”. (see next section).

Aymongol adds that the manohra is now completely different in movements and costume from any form of drama in central Thailand; the dancing and singing, too, belong specifically to the South.

A French writer included in Dr Mattani’s book (the article was written in 1923) said: “The lakhon chatrī troupes are strolling comedians who go from village. I had the chance of seeing one at Khao Tao.

“They arrived in single file at sunset, covered in dust from trekking along sandy paths, each carrying his bundle of accessories wrapped in a brightly coloured cloth. The little procession entered the village surrounded by children who had run up to greet them, then gathered in front of a farmer’s house where there was some kind of celebration.

“That evening they performed an episode from Sang-tong (the Golden Conch). Usually, when they arrive unexpectedly, they stop in the liveliest part of the village, normally the market; they set up their musical instruments and beat a tattoo on the drums to announce their arrival.

“Almost invariably, someone in the village has a vow to fulfil or some ceremony to be carried out which calls for a theatrical show; so arrangements are made with the troupe-master... And if by chance nobody engages them, the performance takes place just the same, a collection is taken and everyone contributes either money or food.”

It’s the lakhon chatrī which one sees performed today at shrines where people still come to fulfil vows made to spirits in return for some favour granted — such as the Erawan Brahma shrine, the “Lak Muang” or City Pillar shrine, and further afield at such places as the San Prakan shrine in Lop Buri, and in Petchaburi Province.

When it came from the South to the capital (Bangkok or Ayutthaya, I’m not sure when) the lakhon chatrī also underwent changes in the costumes and orchestra, so giving rise to the lakhon nork; “nork” means “outside” or “outer”, perhaps because it came from the “outer provinces” — the South.

Originally performed entirely by men, the lakhon nork

aims at quick action and humour, with short colloquial lines and plenty of openings for the cast to ad-lib. The acting must be lively and natural. "Sangthong", arranged as a lakhon nork by King Rama II, is a favourite story.

At some time in the past, Royalty may have taken the lakhon nork into the Royal Palace and court, making big changes and turning it into the lakhon nai ("inside"), performed exclusively by ladies of the court. (Other experts think it may have been the other way round!) The lakhon nai still places great emphasis on dancing and on slow, graceful and "correct" movements. The story performed in lakhon nai is always an episode from "Inao", based on a tale from Java but now firmly ensconced as a part of Thai literature, having been rewritten by King Rama II in a version highly suitable for stage presentation.

The lakhon nork and the lakhon nai are still performed from time to time by the Fine Arts Department; and the styles have by now to some extent become intermingled, with both sexes performing in both types.

There are several other forms of lakhon, including the lakhon phanthang, which means "hybrid", and which Ayumongkol neatly sums up as a general term for all forms which can't be fitted into any other category...

...Phew...

Lakhon phanthang stories include Rajathiraj and Prince Narathip's version of another very old story, Phra Law.

As you can see, the various kinds of Thai dance-drama are pretty complicated (at least for a Westerner like me) — and they are also all interrelated.

One of the writers in Dr Mattani's book says (1972) that at least during this century, the manohra's most characteristic features have been (a) the dance made up of stylised attitudes forming basic steps — "the spider weaving its web," "Rahu seizing the moon," "the half-open lotus," and so on; (b) a clever, comic stream of rhyming verse in the southern dialect; and (c) a play, which might go on throughout the whole night.

The 12 stories said to comprise the basic repertoire of the old-time manohra are more or less the same as those performed as lakhon nork in central Thailand — Sangthong,

Kawee, Khun Chang Khun Phaen, Phra Aphai Mani, Kraithong and so on.

But nowadays in a typical modern manohra the hero is usually a young government official or professional man, and the treatment is a combination of low-key melodrama and broad comedy, with the hero, heroine and other main characters speaking in central (Bangkok) Thai, while only the comics and country characters speak in southern dialect (ee, boot it moost be soomthing like them comic characters as coom from the north-country in English farce!)

The lakhon chatrī of central Thailand also follows the same fashion; certain characters such as the forester speak with a southern accent, to remind the audience of the chatrī's southern origins.

There are four or five other kinds of lakhon which I'd like to mention, but space forbids, and I've dealt with the main ones. (My wife has just told me about two more which I've never even heard of: Lakhon yoi, a short sketch or sideshow, and lakhon yok, a toy theatre used as an offering in spirit houses and other shrines).

There's one more dramatic show, the simplest of all: The sepha, defined as "story-telling by the recitation of rhymes previously composed." The rhyme, I gather, is always an episode from the same long classic story — that of Khun Chang Khun Phaen.

For a sepha performance there's no need for a stage, nor for much space. A reciter (more than one, if it's a long recitation) and his castanets plus an orchestra are all that's needed.

When a sepha reciter feels like a rest, he brings a passage of the rhymes to an end by singing it, and the orchestra takes its cue and strikes up the same tune, while the reciter lights a cigarette or goes out for a breather. (This was written in 1940).

Now I'll deal briefly with the "nang" or shadow-play.

"Nang" means animal hide or leather, and it refers to the leather from which the beautiful and intricate characters have always been cut out (and still are).

The words of the "nang" are recited by a chorus, and the transparencies are moved about in accordance with the

words by men who are generally accomplished dancers, as they have to dance while they move the pictures.

The figures of each character are drawn, embossed, and painted on large sheets of hide and are mounted on sticks as holders. The story is always an episode from the "Ramakien" — as with the khon.

In fact it seems to be the general opinion that the khon (which is known to be very old) evolved out of the "nang" — which must therefore be even older; for the manner in which the "nang" players have to leap about behind the screen is very similar to the virile, leaping movements of the khon.

This form of "nang" is now known as "nang yai" or "large nang" for a reason I'll explain in a minute; it is still performed from time to time by the Fine Arts Department and Ayumongkol says the best place to see it is at Wat Khanon, a temple in Ratchaburi.

Another form is known as "nang talung;" the figures are much smaller (which is why the original form is called "nang yai") and quite different because the arms and legs are movable.

"Nang talung" performances consist of all kinds of light drama; the manipulators are usually singers and comics who evoke roars of laughter from their audience (rather like the likay, in fact — see next section). Troupes nowadays are mainly in the South.

Four of the Chakri Kings — Rama I, Rama II Rama V, and Rama VI — made outstanding contributions to the richness of Thai literature which finds one of its main expressions in the stories performed as one of other of the various forms of Thai dance-drama; words which can *only* be fully appreciated by a Thai.

As I said earlier, these forms are all interrelated — or at least seem so to a Westerner. The *apparent* similarity in the costumes and movements tend to make all the classical forms of dance-drama look similar; to me, at any rate.

But to every Thai, the differences and nuances between the different forms are surely very marked.

From what I've written already, and if you've seen Thai classical drama performances yourself, it'll be obvious that dances or dance movements usually form an integral part of

the telling of the story. Conversely, if you see a short classical dance performance at a hotel, restaurant or similar place, the chances are it'll be a shortened episode, or part of an episode, from one of the Thai literary classics.

In his introduction to Dhani Yupho's article in "Souvenir of Siam," the late Phya Anuman Rajadhon (also formerly of the Fine Arts Department) says: "Dancing arose with jumping and capering about to express the emotions which stirred one's heart. Later the movements were improved and made beautiful to give pleasure to the spectators. In its original form (called 'rabam') the dancing was unconnected with any theme. Later on it was adapted to the interpretation of the story..."

Phya Anuman points out that this adaptation was done to make the "rabam" more interesting; among other versions he mentions the "Praleng" danced in pairs, holding a peacock's tail-feathers in each hand, and the "Dance of the Silver and Gold Flowers," both of which are preliminaries to khon and lakhon performances. During training, the distinction is maintained: beginners first practise the "rabam" or dancing to music alone without any theme, and only later do they learn to interpret stories through dancing.

Dhanit Yupho gives full and fascinating details of 52 separate dance movements of scenes (including seven types of dancing with rapiers, swords and sticks). I'll just outline a few of these, starting with dance scenes which are part of the khon (that is, the "Ramakien" story) and of lakhon stories, and *then* going on to the dances "*per se*" — including the relatively modern ramwong. I must point out that what follows is a very drastic simplification, purely for reasons of space. First, the "Ramakien" includes an important *style* of solo dancing called "chui-chai", used when a character feels pleased with him or herself after having dressed up or changed by magic into someone or something prettier; a male character "struts about," while a female one "minces" — for instance, when Benjakai has successfully disguised herself as Sida, and also just before the demon king Totsakan visits Sida who is a prisoner in his garden.



In fact, it seems to me that every khon performance — that is, every “Ramakien” episode — can really be thought of as one long series of individual “sub-episode” dances, such as “Rama bathing,” “The capture of Benjakai,” “Rama crossing the sea with his army,” and “Presenting the Monkey” — in which Totsakan is furiously angry and his dancing is the very opposite of “chui-chai,” whereas the white monkey Hanuman, Rama’s commander-in-chief, “keeps his cool” and dances accordingly.

Other story-linked dances described by Dhanit Yupho include “Phra Law in the Garden;” “Busaba in the Temple” from the “Inao” story; “Rochana’s Garland” from the Sang Thong story, in which Princess Rochana chooses her future husband by throwing the garland at the apparently ugly “ngoh” Sang Thong. All these and many others form an integral part of their respective stories when these are performed as lakhons on the stage. (Perhaps the comparison is not very apt, but I can’t help being reminded of the stylised and elegant dances in Gilbert and Sullivan’s “The Gondoliers” and “The Yeomen of the Guard.”)

There are other dances or sets of dances which are complete stories in themselves, such as “Mekala and Ramasoon” which is about thunder and lightning.

And now to my original query about Thai classical dance “*per se*.” Well, as I suspected, there *are* such dances. Among others, Dhanit Yupho describes the Flower Pot Dance introduced from Vietnam during King Rama I’s reign, and modified into the Lantern Dance by King Mongkut (Rama IV); The Fan Dance, modelled on that of China during King Rama II’s reign; “Si-nuan”, a delightful and popular folk-dance; and two other beautiful and well known dances from the North of Thailand, the Candle Dance and the “Fon Lep” or Nail Dance.

Finally, then, to a totally different and much more modern type of dance, the ramwong. I’m including it here because for Westerners such as myself it *is* Thai and it *is* a distinct dance-form. Moreover, the book “Ramwong Songs” from which I’ve obtained my information is published by the Fine Arts Department; and once again, its preface is written by Dhanit Yupho (in 1960.)



He says the ramwong evolved from the ramthone, formerly a popular seasonal entertainment in certain regions of Thailand, in which the instruments were the “ching” or small cymbals, the “krab” or castanets and the small drums or “thones” which provided the rhythm and gave the dance its name. In about 1940 the ramthone spread to other parts of the country, and was danced throughout the whole year; a great many new songs were specially composed for it — invitations to join the dance, love duets, praising of beauty and so on.

In 1944 the Fine Arts Department decided to promote the ramthone and improve it to conform with the art and tradition of Thai dance. The Department also officially renamed it the ramwong (which was what everyone called it, anyway) because the dancers form a chain which becomes a circle (“ram” means “to dance” and “wong” is a circle). After World War II the ramwong grew even more popular — especially among Westerners, says Dhanit Yupho; and as a result it has been introduced into many other countries.

I too danced the ramwong many years ago, soon after I first came to Thailand; it happened on a stage in a restaurant, and — no doubt like many another “farang”, before and since — I felt acutely self-conscious...

And quite unnecessarily.

## Linda, the likay and look-toong songs

"You ought to write about the likay," said my friend Khun Sri on the phone one day. "My assistant cook used to be a likay player. Why don't you come over and interview her?"

The likay is one of the many different types of Thai drama; the dictionary calls it "A song-and-dance drama, mostly about kings and queens, formerly played by men only, now obsolescent,"

According to M.R. Kukrit Pramoj's book "My Private World," the likay became a folk-art in Siam at the beginning of King Chulalongkorn's reign — that is, a little over 100 years ago.

It has always been looked down upon as being rather "folksy" and satirical, not quite "the done thing" for people of breeding to watch; but nevertheless it has produced some great artists.

Moreover, it has recently received a shot in the arm thanks to television and a few troupes such as Somsak's "likay ngern lahn" or "million-baht likay" which have become popular with the viewing public.

But to get back to Khun Sri's assistant cook.

What Khun Sri didn't tell me over the phone was that her assistant cook is a dazzlingly beautiful 28-year-old girl named Linda, with all the charm, sparkle and graceful movement of a true Thai.

As soon as she walked into Khun Sri's sitting-room I realised this was going to be no ordinary interview; it was going to be as much the story of Linda as of the likay.

"Isn't Linda a Western name?" I asked, but I was assured that although originally borrowed from the West it's becoming increasingly common in modern Thailand; Linda's

parents gave her that name, and it became shortened to "Da" — as happens with other girls with the same name.

In a way, this is typical of this whole story; how something very Thai has adopted certain features from the West, and yet preserved all its "Thai-ness."

Linda is not only very beautiful; she is also gentle, has graceful manners and a big heart. When she came across from her chair to the sofa on which I was sitting to show me her photographs, she approached me on her knees.

But what impressed me most was that she had given up being a likay artiste — and a very good one, by all accounts — several years earlier than she need have done, purely to please her mother, whom she loves very much and who was evidently more worried about Linda's long-term future than was Linda herself.

And that's how she became Khun Sri's assistant cook.

Linda is also very generous with her money towards her younger brothers and sisters, Khun Sri tells me.

Linda's home is in Samut Sakhon Province, southwest of Bangkok. Her parents were vegetable growers (her mother still is) but her father died when she was little; she's the second of six children.

From when she was quite tiny, Linda was fascinated by the strolling players, the likay troupes, who were invited to her village by the local temple to perform at temple fairs. Before she was 12, she begged to be allowed to join the troupe, but her mother answered with a firm "no".

So at the age of 12 Linda went to work in a bag-making factory in Bangkok's Klong Toey slum; and there she stayed for the next nine years. But whenever she went home on visits to Samut Sakhon and saw likay shows, all the old longing came back.

Finally at the age of 22 Linda approached the "dto-po" or leader of a troupe playing in the village and begged to be taken on; and he agreed.

Now we come to a slightly complicated part of the story, and I must thank my friend Ayumongol for helping to clarify it.

There's a new form of Thai entertainment, only 15 or 20 years old, called the look-toong, which consists of popular

folksongs influenced by Western ideas.

The look-toong is not only part of Linda's personal story, but is closely bound up with the present and future of the likay itself. "Look-toong" means literally "a son or daughter of the fields, the meadows, the countryside."

Ayumongol sums up the relationship like this: "Likay is one of the fathers of look-toong, but he omitted to marry the mother."

Then who is (or was) the mother?

Western pop music, answers Ayumongol!

Khun Sri says the likay is slowly being edged out in popularity by the look-toong, and only the elderly now enjoy likay performances. Look-toong, she says, is "pure Thai in the modern way." The costumes and the rhythm are Western, but the words are very Thai. Khun Sri finds both words and music "catchy"; she gave me some examples: "Please me now, while I'm still here to be pleased; we've been in love a long while, but you haven't even bought me a new watch; this diamond is much too small, I don't care for it any more...." And in another song the look-toong sings of driving his girl-friend Aeo to Ramkhamhaeng University every day, paying for her studies with his meagre earnings from passengers; the song ends with Aeo forsaking him for a new boy-friend who drives her to the university in a Jaguar.

Unlike the likay, too, which uses the classical Thai "piphat" band with its Thai tonal scale, the look-toong uses Western instruments such as the saxophone and trumpet.

Another feature of the look-toong is the chorus-line of dancers called the "hang kreuang" (literally, "the wash behind a boat").

All this is part of Linda's story, and I had to explain it before going on with the story.

The training of a likay player is very difficult, and usually takes at least four years; some would-be players never make the grade at all. But perhaps because she was so keen on it, Linda became fully trained after only two years.

All the troupe of 30 or 40 men and women lived together in a big house in a soi off Sukhumvit Road, sleeping perhaps 10 to a room, with board and lodging provided free by the troupe-master. Every morning, Linda and the other begin-

ners received training from five a.m. to seven a.m. The likay isn't just a dramatic folk-tradition; for the performers, it's a whole way of life.

Now from what I can gather, this troupe seems to have been rather special. In order to help offset the cost of maintaining Linda and the other trainees, the troupe-master would occasionally put on a look-toong show as a prelude or warming-up before the likay performance. While she was still under training, Linda took part in these look-toongs, either as the "nak-rong" or singer, or as a dancer in the "hang kreuang" or chorus-line. This combination of a look-toong and a likay is apparently an innovation which has not yet become widespread.

In spite of her nice nature, the troupe-master nearly always cast Linda as the "nang-goang" or female villain, the "bad woman," because she has a very strong, high-pitched singing voice. "You have to scream!" said Linda.

The elderly village folk who watch likay performances at temple fairs become totally involved in the story, and Linda often had shoes hurled at her from the audience! Afterwards, some of the old folk would come round to the back of the informal stage and scold her: "Why did you do all those dreadful things, you bad girl?" To which Linda would meekly reply, "Because it's part of the story." Only occasionally did she play the "nang-ek" or heroine.

As for the likay stories themselves, they're taken from all kinds of Thai literature: Stories such as Phra Chai Suriya, Kawee, Khun Chang Khun Phaen, and Phra Aphai Mani, according to the taste of the local audience. Sometimes the story is improvised by the troupe-master himself.

Likay performances are seasonal, mainly during the third and fourth (lunar) months — that is, February and March. During the off-season some of the girls sing in restaurants, or are employed as "hang kreuang" by look-toong troupes; the men are often out of work. But the troupe-master provides the whole troupe of 30 or 40 players with free board and lodging all the year round.

During the likay season, said Linda, they would often travel upcountry, first getting up at five a.m. to memorise their songs and spoken lines until seven a.m. When on the

road, they would sometimes do a two-night stand in the provinces, going as far afield as Korat, Chiang Mai and Hat Yai.

Before every performance — in fact, before EVERY Thai dramatic or artistic performance of whatever kind, as far as I know — there's always a "wai kru" ceremony in which homage is paid to the "reusi" or hermit, the legendary teacher of all the arts.

Likay players evidently have to be pretty tough; performances usually start at eight p.m. and continue without a break until about one a.m.

Linda's troupe didn't put on any likay shows during the off-season, but she says other troupes sometimes perform in markets; the market-owner temporarily shuts up shop (this is called "bpit talaht" in Thai) and presents a likay as publicity for his market!

There are also special "rong likay" or likay theatres in some upcountry districts, though I believe these no longer exist in Bangkok. They are simple affairs with wooden pillars and benches, palm-thatched walls and a corrugated-iron roof. When a troupe wants to play in a "rong likay" the place must be hired, and the troupe is responsible for its own promotion.

As I said, it isn't considered quite "proper" for educated people to watch likay shows (except on television, of course!) Khun Sri says that when she was a child living in Thon Buri about 30 years ago, her family had quite a large number of servants (including all their families) and sometimes they would all suddenly disappear — to attend a likay performance. She remembers being smuggled out of the house one evening about eight o'clock by her nursemaid, who just couldn't bear to stay away from the action! She also told me that a relative, now over 60, remembers a similar occurrence as a child — but on that occasion, the "rong likay" caught fire halfway through the show, putting an abrupt stop to it!

I asked Linda how much it cost to hire a troupe for a likay show; she thought about 2,000 to 3,000 baht (but that was more than two years ago!) Each player was paid 50 baht for the five-hour performance; not very much, really, but

nevertheless Linda says she'd like to go back to her old likay life, because she enjoyed it so much.

In fact Khun Sri told me later that every New Year Linda and some of her kitchen colleagues and friends still put on a special likay show for the staff of her (Khun Sri's) husband's clinic. Once again Linda wears her "villainess" likay costume, sings and dances the stories she has improvised for the occasion, and screams her raucous and slightly bawdy jokes. "You'd never know it was the same girl!" said Khun Sri.

Khun Sri thinks the likay, which is now only (or at any rate, mainly) popular with elderly people, will last maybe another 20 years or so as popular entertainment; even now it's being edged out by the semi-Westernised look-toong. However, not everyone seems sure about this.

One difference between the likay and the look-toong, incidentally, is that after each show the "popular" likay players (hero, heroine, etc) receive flower-garlands with money attached, while look-toong singers and dancers are only garlanded with flowers — no money!

Two further comments from other people are worth mentioning.

Andrea Cahn of TV Channel 3 says her Channel has never broadcast look-toong shows because most of the look-toong bands feel that if they are too exposed on TV, people won't go to see them at temple fairs and similar celebrations where the look-toong is already gradually replacing the likay.

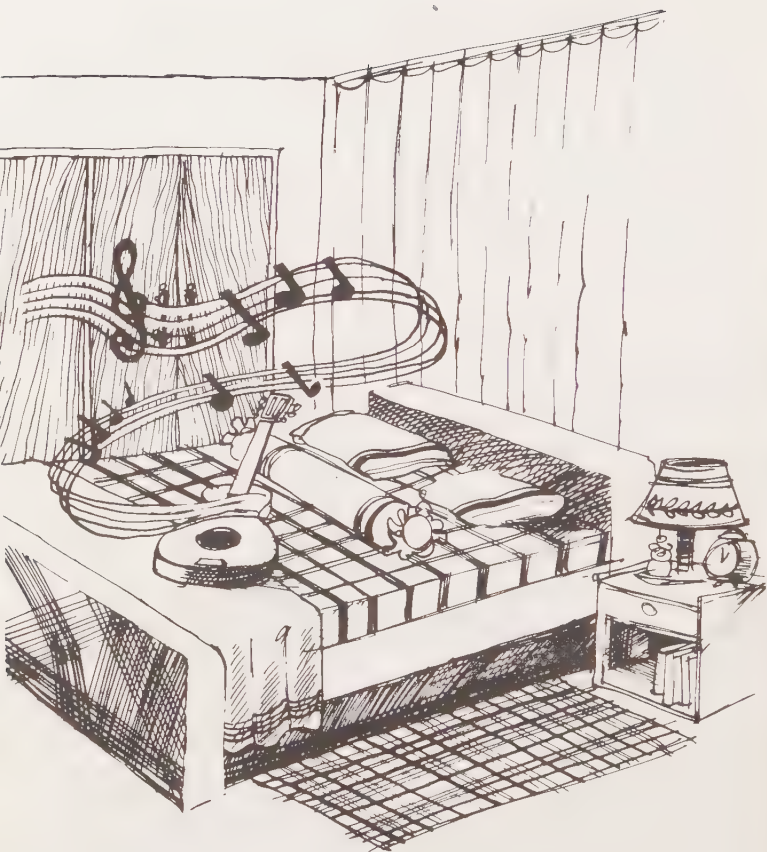
And now to end with, back to some old folk-lore about the likay — from my wife. She says the likay can somehow confer the magic power of "saneh" or charm, and the "phra-ek" or hero is given this power (I suppose by incantations) before he puts on his make-up. This makes him attractive to women...

I'd like to say a specially warm "thank you" to Khun Sri, who carefully checked this story. And also to Ayumongol, who went to considerable trouble in checking facts about the history of the likay.



# CHAPTER NINE

# ODDS AND ENDS



YOO KAEWDEE

## A tale of a “bpeeb”

One evening when we were sitting at home my wife suddenly burst out laughing. I asked her what she was laughing about, and she said she'd just remembered something which happened a long time ago.

This is quite a common occurrence; Laddawan suddenly remembers something interesting or funny from the past, which I inevitably put down on paper.

She's not sure how old she was at the time, but she thinks she was about 16 or 17. She had the reputation among her relatives and friends of being what Thais call “ser-sah” or “soom-sahm.” I think this can best be translated as “ham-fisted.”

At this time she and her sister lived in Samrong, between Bangkok and Paknam but nearer to Paknam. An elder cousin of hers, a man called “Phee-Wai”, used to deal in sugar. Everyone in the neighbourhood used to gather the sweet liquid from the coconut-palm trees in their orchards and boil it into palm-sugar, which is delicious and rather like fudge. Phee-Wai used to buy the sugar from all the houses in the district, and sell it to a merchant whose place of business was alongside busy Klong Padung Krung Kasem, near the main Hualampong railway station in the heart of Bangkok.

Phee-Wai put the sugar in what are called “bpeeb” — empty kerosine tins. As far as Laddawan remembers, a “bpeeb” full of palm-sugar weighed about 30 kilos, and they used to load about 70 “bpeeb” in Phee-Wai's boat for each trip to Bangkok. That's about 2,000 kilos — or two tons!

The boat was the old-fashioned kind called a "rua jaeo", propelled manually by large oars or paddles fixed to posts, one in the bow and the other at the stern. The rowers worked standing up; Laddawan rowed in the bow.

If you look at a map of Bangkok and its surroundings, you'll see that it's quite a long way by water from Samrong down the canal, Klong Samrong, to the Chao Phya and then up the river to the city.

In fact the route they followed made use of a convenient short-cut which bypasses the enormous loop in the river including the Port of Bangkok at Klong Toey. In English we sometimes call such a canal cut through a narrow neck of land "The Cut," and by coincidence the Thai name for this particular short-cut canal is "Klong Koot"! ("koot" means "to dig").

So what they did was to propel the large, heavily-laden boat down Klong Samrong into the river, then turn left and go *downstream* for about a mile, then across the river to Phra Pradaeng and along the "Klong Koot."

They always set off on these trips very early, about 4 a.m., and Laddawan remembers the vast expanse of night sky full of stars — including an occasional shooting-star, which rather scared her!

Sometimes, just as they had nosed snugly into "Klong Koot", a huge sampan or junk would come sailing past behind them down the river — and the resulting undertow from the wash would suck their smaller boat right out of the klong back into the river!

From the map, I reckon the total distance they had to paddle their boat with its heavy load was about 14 miles. Anyway, the journey took about six hours — for which Laddawan was paid five baht.

Arriving at Klong Padung Krung Kasem at about 10 a.m., they would unload all the "bpeebs" from the boat onto the jetty. The merchant would take them away, remove the sugar, and dump the "empties" back on the jetty. Laddawan's job was to stay on shore and throw each empty "bpeebe" back to Phee-Wai on the boat.

On this particular occasion, she didn't throw one of the "bpees" hard enough, and it fell short into the water, where it floated. Phee-Wai bent down to retrieve it, but he too failed to grab it the first time; he straightened his back, and bent down again to try to fish it out of the water.

Laddawan, who surely couldn't have been concentrating on the job, chose precisely that moment to throw the next "bpee". It caught Phee-Wai smartly between the eyes with a resounding thwack, just as he was bending down...

That was the memory which made Laddawan suddenly laugh the other evening at home.

That, and the torrent of abusive language Phee-Wai used, which was quite unprintable. I imagine the Thai equivalent of "You clumsy oaf!!" figured largely in it — or something even less polite...

Laddawan's other chief memory of those long, tiring river trips was the journey home.

Of course the boatload was much less without those two tons of sugar. But it could still be hard work, depending on the direction of the current in the Chao Phya; if the tide was coming in, the return to Samrong could take almost as long as the outward journey.

But sometimes as they paddled out of Klong Padung Krung Kasem into the river, they were in luck: They were able to get a hitch from an engine-powered boat. For this towing service, of course, they had to pay.

...That is, unless they were even luckier and met a string of ricebarges. In that case they would hail the rearmost boat and hitch themselves onto it. That way, the skipper never saw them, and they didn't have to pay anything...

Phee-Wai had taught Laddawan (or he thought he had taught her) always to loop their tow-rope into several coils, so that when they hailed the engine-driven boat or barge, Laddawan could throw all the coils together. Then the coils of rope would have enough momentum to carry them all the way from their boat to the other one.

But on one occasion she forgot to coil the rope as she'd been taught. She just tossed the end of the rope — which of course fell plop in the water, a long way short of the barge.

As luck would have it, that was the last barge-string of the day, and once again they had to paddle the 14 miles home under their own muscle-power...And poor Laddawan was once again on the receiving end of Phee-Wai's sarcastic and colourful tongue.

## A story of grit and determination

A few years ago I received a handwritten letter care of the Bangkok World's sister publication Student Weekly, for which I write a regular column on English idioms.

It was an intriguing letter, to say the least. The first thing that caught my eye was the heading "Top Secret!" It began, "Dear Sir, This is my first letter that I write to a man in English.

"I know that my English Grammar is not good enough to write. But I try.

"May I introduce myself first. I am an old Thai-girl and am now working as clerk in..." (here she gave he details of her office and the name of her town in Northeast Thailand. She has asked me not to give her real name or her native town because she doesn't want anyone who may read this to recognise her and think she's seeking publicity. I respect her wish and shall therefore change the town to Roi-Et and give her the fictitious name Tanya).

The letter went on to say she earned 1,220 baht a month. "When I'm in trouble I'll write letter to my friend to pretend that I am very happy. No one know that I feel very sad.

"...When I heard some one said that if we need to be good in English not only to read but also to write letter. That why I try to write this letter to you to practise my English.

"And hope that you won't mind to answer this letter to a pen-pal in Roi-Et... Thank you!"

Of course I answered it. I made a photocopy of it, on which I corrected her mistakes, and sent it back to her.

I was curious to know just what she meant by "an old Thai-girl," and also the significance, if any, of that "Top Secret!" (I later discovered it was just a joke!)

I asked her to tell me more about herself, and told her a



few details about myself too — such as my age, which was then 64.

Her second letter followed promptly — “...You and I are old, why just pretend that we are young enough for the new world. (Young in heart)... I was born in the year 1944. My father had died when I was two years old. When I was five years old my mother married again. — My world has broken down. I couldn't stay with my step-father. My aunt took me to live with her. I feel (she meant 'I felt') so bitter, sorry and worry... I finished school (MS 3) when I was 17 years old now I'm 34 years old and studying in MS 5. I have to study English in school too... And now you can help me with my English. And do you know? I am very interested in an old Englishman like you. And hope that you are a good person too...”

I corrected that letter too, answered her queries about grammar, and returned it. And so it went on; I received a dozen or so letters in the two years that followed. I learned that she was working very hard indeed, studying for her MS5 English exam for four and a half hours every evening after a long working day — and all day Saturday too. She was doing very well, getting “A's” and good grade points term after term.

It wasn't long before she telephoned me one Saturday morning at home to say she was in Bangkok for the weekend. I invited her over to my house for the day, and my wife Laddawan and I got to know her quite well. She's a pleasant-looking woman, rather with the tough upcountry appearance of a farmer, yet extremely fluent in spoken English, and obviously a person of great sincerity.

That day I learnt about her five children, all at school, her husband who earned a little over 1,000 baht a month as a government driver, and whom she loves and is faithful to. She's a fine wife and mother, and her sole aim in life was (and still is) to better herself so her husband and family can have a higher quality of life. And she has always known that the only way towards a better job was for her to master the English language.

Her letters continued after that first visit. Gradually I learnt about her earlier life. After leaving school at 17 she came,

like so many others, to Bangkok, full of hope.

“...I was so excited. I stay with my cousin. I begged her to find me a job, so she found me a job working in the house of a Chinese family. I received only 50 baht a month.

“I needed a place to live, so I stayed there for one month. After that my cousin found me another job, this time working for a Thai family. My responsibility was to care for the children...

“I got married when I was 23 years old. I married him because I need a friend to protect my life... He was nice, so I thought that nothing will happen between us, even though we had no money at all after we got married. We worked very hard to earn the living. We used to work in rice-field.

“When I was in Bangkok I had a part time in the afternoon to go to learn typing. I can type both Thai and English that is why I could get the job in Roi-Et government office two years after I got married. My salary was 400 baht a month.

“...I tried so hard because my education was very low. Two years after I was in high school, I finished and my heart leaped with joy. I got 2.90 (grade points). I can't tell how glad I am...”

Immediately after passing her MS 5 exam in English, Tanya was able to get a much better-paid job in one of Thailand's many refugee camps.

She is now much nearer to Bangkok — but, sad to say, separated from her family in Roi-Et. She started coming to me for English lessons at weekends, and I did what I could to help her further.

Khun Tanya is pushing and struggling ahead with her English because she still doesn't earn enough and needs a better job. I have written about her because to me she seems a fine example of Thai grit and determination to pull oneself up by one's own bootstraps, and succeed — not for herself, but for the sake of her husband and children.

## When “Toang” was a novice

Until a few years ago, my wife's sister Sumalee, her husband and her four children lived with us in a series of rooms in the outbuildings of my rented house. Sumalee's husband drove me to work every morning in a battered old Corolla, and fetched me home in the evening.

Then suddenly, for no reason that I ever discovered, her husband died in November 1979, after less than a week in hospital. I never did find out just what he died of. The body was kept at a large temple nearby until the following April (1980), when it was cremated; and on the occasion of the cremation Sumalee's 13-year-old son whose nickname is “Toang” became ordained as a Buddhist novice monk.

There was nothing unusual in this. Young boys often ordain as novices as part of the cremation ceremony of a parent or elderly relative. This is known in Thai by a characteristically simple and picturesque phrase — “buat nah fai,” literally “ordination in front of the fire.” But usually such entries into the monkhood only last for a few days; in fact my wife says a boy may even ordain on the morning of the cremation day, and disrobe again the same evening.

With Toang, however, it was different. He had long wanted to wear the orange robes and take the vows of a Buddhist novice. As early as 1976 when I was a monk for a month at Wat Cholprataru just outside Bangkok, and Toang was only nine, whenever the family came to visit me Toang would look wistful and beg his mother to let him become a novice. Sumalee even went as far as asking the abbot what was the earliest age at which they accepted novices, and was told nine years old.

However, Sumalee wouldn't agree, because Toang was so naughty. My wife says he used to come and ask her every day for five baht, and whenever she refused he would

fly into a rage and bang his fist on the table or stamp his foot; and he used to steal the occasional 100-baht note left lying on the table. Yet still, he continued wanting to become a novice.

In retrospect, it seemed almost as if he knew of his own shortcomings and wanted to put them right — or, who knows, perhaps he even felt he *must* put them right.

Toang disrobed after nine months. The change in that boy while he was in the monkhood was quite remarkable.

All monks and novices (a man cannot become a full monk until he is 20) are naturally calm, and their outward equanimity may be taken as a sign of an inner peace of mind — though again, no one other than the individual himself can know whether this is indeed so or not. But the new thoughtful look in Toang's eyes, whenever he came to visit us, and his willingness and aptitude to learn Pali and the Dhamma or Lord Buddha's Teachings, seemed to indicate that he really was finding a new peace of mind.

On his visits to our house, I used to "wai" to him and he smiled but being in the monkhood he did not, of course, "wai" back.

On his last visit as a novice he sat on a garden chair on the verandah and faultlessly intoned a Pali blessing while his mother and I knelt "waiing" in front of him.

In a way, Toang was probably instrumental in saving his mother's life and that of his sister Mook; for the two of them were at the temple visiting him when the giant banyan tree at the back of our house crashed to the ground in a thunderstorm, completely demolishing our outbuildings. If Sumalee and Mook had been in their rooms, they would almost certainly have been crushed to death. Mook's father, having died five months earlier, was spared all this; but the ancient Corolla was a crumpled mass of metal, and the garage in which it had been parked was a heap of smashed timber and rubble.

On one occasion, Toang brought a fellow-novice of about the same age to our house. This boy was from a very poor family indeed, as the following little incident shows.

The novice (we never asked his name) went to the toilet. Seeing a strange-looking knob, he pulled it... The next

second, he was out in the kitchen yelling at the top of his voice “MAEH!!! TOK JAI MOT LEUY!!!” (“COO!!! THAT DIDN'T HALF GIVE ME A START!!!”) The sudden loud noise caused by his pulling the knob, plus all that water gushing out all over the place, had startled him out of his wits. It was the very first time in his life that he'd ever seen a flush toilet!

P.S. While I was busy writing this, sitting on the verandah, I became aware of someone squatting in front of me and “wai-ing” respectfully. I looked up; it was Toang — dressed in an ordinary white shirt and shorts...

## Our Eclipse

In 1980 a partial eclipse of the Sun took place on Chinese New Year's Day. This was not specially arranged as part of the festivities; it was, I believe, a purely natural phenomenon.

Eclipses are universal, of course, but there were a few rather Thai features about our eclipse. When I say "our," I mean our private family eclipse, as viewed from our garden.

As readers of "Thai Ways" may know, my wife Laddawan is an astrologer. Perhaps that's why I couldn't seem to get her interested in looking at the eclipse itself. She was far more interested in her astrological books and charts, trying to work out *why* there should be an eclipse on that particular day, February 16.

Anyway, I am interested in nature in a mild sort of way, and around 4.30 p.m. I realised I should have remembered to get hold of some dark-coloured plastic to look at the Sun, but hadn't done anything about it.

I searched in the drawer in my bedroom, but found only one rather tatty old pair of sunglasses. One quick look at the Sun through them immediately convinced me that that was the way to sure and permanent blindness. I began yelling for more sunglasses. I borrowed Laddawan's, and another pair from her sister Sumalee.

Have you ever tried looking at the Sun through *three* pairs of sunglasses? Dogged to the last, I managed to keep all three pairs on my nose, and — yes, there it was! A neat arc cleanly clipped out from the bottom right-hand edge of the Sun. Excited, I called Laddawan to come and look, but by now she was involved in something far more interesting on the telly.

About 15 minutes later I took another squint, and — yes again, the missing piece of Sun had definitely grown bigger.

I asked Sumalee and her daughter Mook to have a look through the sunglasses, and they saw it too; unlike my wife, they seemed quite interested.

As I continued looking every 15 minutes or so, the Sun's missing arc grew larger and gradually shifted upwards and to the right. It was some time about then that I first became aware of The Smell.

It was awful. The whole house and parts of the garden reeked with the stench of burning rubber. A fuse or a short circuit? Were we on fire? Or was someone burning old tyres?

A few minutes later Sumalee appeared and smilingly handed me a large piece of heavily smoked glass. "You'll find it much easier with this," she said in Thai. "Better than three pairs of sunglasses!" So that explained where The Smell had come from. I didn't ask what it was that Sumalee had burnt to produce the smoke on the glass; maybe it was old tyres...

Anyway, the smoked glass certainly did make it easier to watch the progress of the eclipse. Sumalee and I were able to follow the missing arc, growing steadily larger and climbing up the Sun's right-hand side.

At one stage, we even lured Laddawan away from her television programme during the commercials. She rushed out onto the lawn, grabbed the smoked glass, took a quick look and said "Yes, yes, I can see it!" "No, you can't — not from where you're standing," retorted Sumalee. "That's a branch of a tree you're looking at!" "Oh, yes, so it is. Well, never mind — I'll take your word for it — " and she dashed back indoors, afraid her programme might have started again.

The best time for viewing the eclipse was just before sunset, when of course the Sun always looks larger — an optical illusion caused by the refraction of the atmosphere or something. It looked just like a quarter-moon.

Next day I got Laddawan to explain what she was trying to find out about the astrology of the eclipse. In a solar eclipse, the Moon comes between the Earth and the Sun. Laddawan was trying to discover whether there was any significance in the fact that on the chart for February 16, the Sun and Moon



(numbers 1 and 2) were both in the same sign of the Zodiac, while Rahu or the Earth (number 8) was in the diametrically *opposite* sign.

In 1978 there was an eclipse of the Moon on March 24. (Laddawan told me this; I checked in the Bangkok Post files, and she was right). In a *lunar* eclipse, the Earth comes between the Sun and the Moon, and it's the Earth's shadow which blocks out all or part of the Moon. The chart for that day again showed the same effect: The Earth and the Moon were in the same Zodiac sign, but that time the Sun was in the *opposite* sign.

It seems to me that this only proves that the true astronomical positions of the planets are shown correctly on the astrological charts — as they should be!

I know just a little bit about the Thai legend of Rahu, or the Earth. Rahu is said to be a giant who puts the Sun in his mouth during a solar eclipse ("Suriyakraht" in Thai) or the Moon in his mouth during a lunar eclipse ("Jantakraht"). Upcountry Thai folk believe that if they can only make enough noise to frighten Rahu away by banging pots and pans and letting off fireworks, he'll go away... And sooner or later, he invariably does!

## On being pregnant

MY wife has been telling me some old Thai beliefs and superstitions about pregnancy. The usual expression for a pregnant woman is “puying mee tong” — “A woman with a stomach.”

...Well, we've all got stomachs, haven't we? But not all of us are pregnant, I'm thankful to say!

However, the Thai expression conveys a straightforward idea (no pun intended) of the state of affairs, and is typical of the down-to-earth Thai way of putting things. It expresses the essence of the matter: Pregnant women have *more* stomach than the rest of us...

The strongest belief about a pregnant woman is a very ancient and deeply-held one. She should never set foot inside the “bot” or main chapel of a temple when any religious ceremony is taking place inside.

The “bot” is used for the ordination ceremony when a man enters the monkhood and for other types of religious function as well. No matter what kind of ceremony is taking place, if a pregnant woman enters the “bot” while it is in progress, it's believed she will have a difficult time during childbirth.

Apart from avoiding this, one way in which she can encourage an easy birth is to eat those rarities, soft-shelled eggs — another delightfully simple analogy! So relatives and friends of a pregnant woman who happen to come across a soft-shelled hen's or duck's egg, always give it to her to eat.

Then there's the belief about elephants, which is mentioned elsewhere in this book. To ensure an easy birth, a pregnant woman should walk under an elephant's belly. My wife thinks this may be because the elephant is a rare, exalted and valuable beast, but she apologises for being a bit vague about the details.

Another well known idea, and surely a most valuable one, is that a pregnant woman should never harbour feelings of blame, resentment or hatred against anyone. The belief is that if she does so, her child will be born with the same characteristics as the person who is hated or resented.

A shopkeeper or vendor is said to be always very pleased when the first customer of the day is a pregnant woman. This is a sign that business will be good for the whole of that day, because, in my wife's words, two pairs of eyes have visited the shop or stall — those of the mother-to-be and those of the unborn child as well! I suppose it's something like having two customers for the price of one.

And talking of two for the price of one, you know those joined-together "twin" bananas which one sees very occasionally? I mean the kind where the two bananas are joined together all the way along, by a common skin. You've probably guessed what's coming... If a pregnant woman eats such a pair of bananas, she'll give birth to — yes — twins! Thai analogy again, at its simplest and most logical.

A Thai friend has also pointed out that taxi drivers are always, especially obliging and kind towards pregnant women because of their "condition." My wife has added her usual shrewd and spicy comment to this, too: She says the driver will do his utmost to help the pregnant woman into the taxi as quickly as possible, and take her to wherever she's going as speedily as he can — because he's scared that she'll give birth inside his taxi!

That's all I know about Thai superstitions concerning pregnancy.

And I'm afraid I can't tell you anything special in the way of Thai beliefs about the birth process itself.

However, my wife says that in upcountry Thailand, after a baby is born, the afterbirth or placenta is usually put inside an earthenware pot and buried under a tree or plant. Not just any tree or plant; it must be the particular species in which the mother's guardian spirit lives. And this depends on which year in the 12-year cycle the mother herself was born.

My wife was born in the Year of the Tiger — "Bpee Kahn" in Thai. Incidentally, according to her huge book of ancient lore, this means she is a "female sea-ogre;" but I can't

honestly say she looks or behaves like one! It also means that her guardian spirit lives in the turmeric or “kamin” plant. So after her son Jiap was born the placenta was duly buried beneath a turmeric plant.

Now here are a few additional details from my wife about birthmarks and moles. A birthmark, Thai people say, is actually a mark made by the undertaker after death in the immediately previous existence. So if a baby has one or more birthmarks, this means it was a human in its previous life.

Moles, like birthmarks, have special significance too — but here again, I’m afraid my wife’s information is rather sketchy. She says that a mole (“fai” in Thai) means either good or bad luck, depending on its position on the body, and on its colour. A red mole is better than a black one, and a “white” one (pale pink, that is) is best of all. She gave me two examples: A mole just beneath the eye signifies teardrops — so there will be much weeping throughout one’s life. And a mole on the stomach, especially if it’s a “white” one, is the best possible kind; it’s called “fai racha” — a “royal mole.”

## A Christmas past

Western readers who have spent Christmas and New Year in Thailand will perhaps have noticed two features which stand out as different from the West: Firstly, Christmas Day in this predominantly Buddhist country is for most Thais a perfectly ordinary working day; and secondly, seasonal gifts are presented at any time between Christmas and New Year's Day.

As those of us who work in offices know, the office is a prime place for present-giving, and throughout the festive season some people's desks are piled with parcels so that one can't always tell whether a person is the giver-to-be, or the receiver. Outside of the office, presents are mostly given during the weekend between Christmas and the New Year, when people have enough leisure time to make rounds of visits to their friends' homes. In Thailand, one gives New Year rather than Christmas gifts — or let's say it's a combination of both. In fact, present-giving continues for several days after New Year's Day.

My own experiences of past working-day Christmases in Bangkok are just a dim memory now, from the days when I taught English and film-making at Chulalongkorn University. But one particular Christmas Day stands out; it's one I'll never forget, because it was so startling and at the same time so typically and delightfully Thai.

I had gone along to give my scheduled English lecture to a group of third-year Physics students in the Faculty of Science. They were a particularly bright and pleasant group, I remember, but on that Christmas Day they somehow seemed even more so than usual. As soon as I set foot inside the classroom they startled me out of my wits by leaping to their feet as one man (and girl) and bursting into violent song. "We wish you a Merry Christmas," they yelled,

in perfect tune, “we wish you a Merry Christmas; we wish you a Merry Christmas, AND A HAPPY NEW YEAR!!!!”

Then they sat down, all grinning broadly. Still in rather a state of shock from this sudden and unexpected assault on my ears. I could only say “Well, er — thank you very much — and the same to you!” (Does one wish a Thai a merry Christmas, I wondered at the back of my mind? I supposed there was no harm in doing so). My commonplace utterance drew a loud and prolonged burst of clapping. I felt as if I’d just won the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Recovering my composure more or less, I was just turning towards the blackboard — my mind had been on irregular verbs, and there was something important I simply had to tell them — when one young man called out “Sir! Sir!” “Yes, what is it?” I asked. The student got up from his seat and, accompanied by much giggling and whispering among the girls, walked up to me and handed me an elegantly wrapped parcel. “For you, Sir,” he said, “Merry Christmas!” Another deafening burst of clapping from everyone. “For me?” I asked — rather superfluously, since he’d just given it to me. I thanked them all profusely, and turned to the blackboard again. But it was not to be... Not yet.

“Open it, Sir!” they called in chorus. Indeed, it was a command. But... Open that gorgeous creation covered in paper bearing a classical Thai motif and decorated with coil upon elegant coil of artistically disposed ribbons? It seemed almost like desecrating a work of art.

However, I did as ordered, hoping that whatever was inside the parcel was even half as beautiful as the outside. I found a plain cardboard box, inside which was a very attractive matching tie and handkerchief in Thai silk. “Oh, this is beautiful! Thank you all very much indeed!” I said again. Then, still thinking of those irregular verbs, I turned once again to the blackboard... Only to be foiled yet again.

“Sir! Sir! Put it on, Sir! Put it on!” Again student authority asserted itself, benevolent but insistent. I had no choice. Standing there in front of them, feeling a bit of a fool but by now grinning as broadly as they were, I undid my tie, took it off and put the gift tie on. At the last minute I also had the presence of mind to tuck the matching handkerchief in my

breast pocket. Another burst of delighted clapping. I now felt like the Best-Dressed Man of the Year.

A little apprehensively, wondering what else was coming — a brass band, perhaps? — I turned to the blackboard for the third time that morning. “And now,” I ventured, “do you remember what I told you last week about those special irregular verbs?”

They did — at least, some of them did. And at last they let me get on with the Christmas Day lecture.



## **“Kamoy!”**

Early one morning some years ago my maid came into the second-floor apartment where I was then living, took a look around and called out “Master! Come look quick! Television and stereo gone!”

It was true. The TV set and stereo were nowhere to be seen. The usual hue and cry was raised, with members of the apartment’s resident staff rushing about clucking like distracted hens.

My maid touched my arm and pointed silently to the tell-tale corner of the screen door leading to the balcony outside. The wire screen had been neatly cut away, leaving a gap just wide enough for an arm to be inserted so that it could reach down and unlock the bolt from inside. So much for the security provided by bolts, I thought ruefully.

Suddenly someone shouted “Look!” and pointed. Perched on top of the high wall separating our compound from that of the large school next door was one of my twin loudspeakers. A search-party went into the school grounds, and there, nestling snugly against the wall hidden from view, they found the lot—TV, stereo and the other loudspeaker, all without even a scratch on them. I was lucky; evidently the “kamoy” (the Thai word for thieves) had been disturbed during their getaway and had made a run for it, leaving their loot behind to be collected later — which they never did.

The second time I was “kamoy’d” I wasn’t quite so lucky. It happened a few years ago, in my present house which is in a quiet soi. My wife, woken up at about one o’clock in the morning by the barking of our dogs, got up and looked out through the window into the garden.

She saw a man walking across the lawn from the fence, over which he had obviously just climbed, towards the back of our house. My wife couldn’t make out in the dark whether

the intruder had a gun or knife hidden on him, so very prudently she remained where she was, inside the house. "KAMOY!" she yelled at the top of her lungs. "KAMOY!! KAMOY!!!"

But nobody else woke up. My wife waited. The events which followed have become a bit confused in the re-telling, but not long afterwards she heard the sound of a motorcycle revving up and roaring away from our gate. She then discovered that one of the two gas cylinders outside our kitchen was missing.

By this time the rest of the family (with the exception of me!) had woken up, and everyone had gathered in the garden. Peering over the fence, my wife could see quite unmistakably the circular mark made in the earth at the edge of the soi where the kamoy had temporarily rested the stolen gas cylinder — and also one of his shoes, which he hadn't had time to put on before making his getaway.

About an hour later there were again shouts of "KAMOY!" from another house a short distance down the soi. A different man was seen running away. All our lot, including my wife's young nephews and nieces, immediately gave chase. My wife says she really doesn't know exactly what two women and three young children would have done if they had caught the "kamoy"!

Meanwhile the owner of the other house had phoned the police, and soon they caught the runaway "kamoy." They brought him along, handcuffed, in their police car and asked my wife if this was the man she had seen; she said no, it wasn't. The police then asked the "kamoy" why he had climbed the wall into the other house. Without batting an eyelid he replied that he had needed to obey a call of nature — but he said it in rather more basic, down-to-earth terminology.

The police told my wife they had already chased a man on a motorcycle and, while doing so, they had seen an empty gas cylinder lying in the ditch in the next soi. Not wishing to lose sight of their prey, they didn't stop to pick the gas cylinder up, intending to do so later. Their prey, however, got away when a traffic light in Sukhumvit Road turned red at a strategic moment; and by the time they got back to where

the gas cylinder had been...Yes, you've guessed it — it was no longer there. Evidently this was the work of a gang, masterminded by a fiendishly cunning stealer of other people's gas cylinders...

As in other countries, Thai "kamoys" do indeed often work in gangs. I'm told they usually hold a little ceremony just inside the premises they are about to burgle. All I know about this ceremony is that it involves a red rose and the lighting of joss-sticks.

The owner of a private company which supplies security guard services once told me a few details about the psychology of "kamoys" in Thailand, and about his own psychological methods in dealing with them — methods which are typically and charmingly Thai.

He said he trained his guards to make friends with the neighbourhood people wherever they were stationed — also including members of the local underworld. When the guards were off duty they sat chatting with the local kamoys in the coffee-shop — something which would surely be unthinkable in the West.

"Please don't come and interfere with us when we're on duty," the guards told them. "After all, we're only doing our job, and it's our livelihood. We have wives and kids, just the same as you. If you pinch anything from our premises, we'll lose our jobs!" The amazing thing was that this friendly man-to-man approach often seemed to work.

There was however one occasion when this "fraternisation" overreached itself. An off-duty security guard had, it seemed, professed his ardent love for the attractive daughter of a leading local gang-leader.

The gang didn't go along with this at all. It was, they felt, carrying "fraternisation" too far — much too far. They decided to teach that security guard a lesson.

At dead of night they broke into the compound where the amorous guard was now on duty, and beat the living daylight out of him. Just to emphasise their point, they also stole a couple of air-conditioners from the same premises.

Unfortunately their intelligence service had let them down; they didn't know that the guards' duty roster had been

changed at the last minute. In the pitch dark, they had beaten up the wrong man...

Next day when they discovered their dreadful mistake, they sent a profuse apology via the grapevine.. And, believe it or not, they also surreptitiously sent back the two air-conditioners!

## A talented little girl

A few years ago I met an interesting and charming little Thai girl who had been in the news. She was Nipa sae Lim of Wat Sa Bua (Lotus-Pond Temple) School, and she had won an award in the UN-sponsored International Children's Art Contest which took her and her art teacher to Paris.

Having myself read about Nipa and her paintings, I decided I'd like to write about her. So off I went with two Thai colleagues to the school, to meet her and her teacher. In fact, as things turned out, I went not once but three times. At our first meeting I hesitatingly asked if I might borrow four of Nipa's paintings to take back to the office for photographing; the following day I went to return the paintings and ask Nipa some more questions, but she'd gone out with her teacher to receive an award from the Ministry of Education — so back I went on the third day. After that, I began to feel I knew Nipa, her art teacher Mrs Montha and the school itself quite well.

Wat Sa Bua School is surprisingly quiet and peaceful considering it's in the heart of the city, just where Rama I Road crosses over the main railway line from Hualamphong Station. What struck me about the temple compound was the apparently total lack of monks each time I went, although a few white-clad Buddhist nuns could be seen.

The other very interesting sight in the compound was the making of joss-sticks. Groups of finished sticks lay in neat circles on the ground, drying. The way these circles are formed is a fascinating example of Thai manual dexterity: The workers simply place a bundle of sticks vertically on the ground, shaped into a rough cyclinder by the middle finger and thumb of each hand — and then take their hands away! As if by magic, the joss-sticks fall neatly on the ground in tightly interlocking circles. ("You and I couldn't do that to

save our lives!" said my Thai colleague to me. I'll go along with that).

Much larger king-size joss-sticks are also made at the temple, about three feet long and looking more like rockets. I believe they are used in the same way as the giant Lent candles, being large enough to stay alight all through Lent.

The school itself is a primary or "Prathom" school, with about 300 pupils aged from seven to 12. The two-storey school building is elderly and charming, built mainly of wood; the cement gables and cornices have delightful stuccoed patterns on them. Inside, all the wooden floors are polished and spotless. A special corner of an upstairs room had been set aside for Nipa to work in — she came in every morning at 7.30 and painted for an hour before school started — and about 25 of her more than 100 paintings were on display round the walls in a larger room.

I found I was able to talk to Nipa without too much difficulty, except for my rather limited vocabulary. She was neither shy nor swollen-headed by her success, but a perfectly normal and delightful little girl, the youngest of seven children. Her father worked as a receptionist and general factotum in a small hotel in Chinatown; her mother made a bit of extra money sewing up cloth sports caps at home. The family was none too well off, I gathered.

Nipa had been painting since she was six. Her work showed tremendous natural talent; but the development of that talent also owed a lot to Mrs Montha, obviously a gifted teacher who knew how to get the best out of her pupils. She had encouraged and nurtured Nipa's gift for painting by taking her to interesting places, pointing things out to her on the spot — and then leaving the rest to Nipa's own vivid memory and imagination.

Whenever foreign countries organise children's art contests, the Thai Government's Public Relations Department sends circulars round to all government schools. This was how Nipa's paintings first became known internationally; she won awards from India in 1975 when she was only eight, and from Italy and Belgium the following year. In the most natural and straightforward manner, she took me to see framed certificates hanging in the headmaster's office.

Nipa's paintings were sheer joy. Subject-matter, composition, line, and especially colour — all were lovely. Done in oils on standard-size 65x45-centimetre canvasses, they were like a microcosm of Thai life: Markets with vendors, street scenes with figures reminiscent of L.S. Lowry's north-of-England milltown paintings, canals, river life, agriculture, Modigliani-like portraits, an ornamental flight of birds, the school playground — and my own favourite, a picture of a woman giving alms to two monks outside a temple. With its flowing lines and brilliant oranges, reds and yellows, this was a little gem.

Mrs Montha also showed me a picture done by eight-year-old Charoenchai, who had been painting for only a year and a half. Noticing his lively interest and doodling based on what she was teaching in class, she started telling him about current events. He got hold of the idea that to cut down forests illegally is wicked — and painted a huge red giant with his mouth full of illegally cut logs in the midst of the forest.



## An idyllic holiday

It must have been in 1969 or 1970 — I can't remember which. I do remember it was late October and it was a carefully planned three-way, 10-day trip. By sea from Bangkok to Songkhla, by the Transport Company's regular orange bus service from Hat Yai across the peninsula to Phuket; then back to Bangkok by Thai Airways.

And it turned out to be one of the most restful, idyllic holidays of my whole life — especially the sea trip.

Unfortunately, the delightful passenger service by sea from Bangkok to Songkhla doesn't exist any more, which is indeed a great pity. It was at that time run by the Thai Navigation Company with three or four coast-going vessels. Ours was the m.v. "Bhanurangsri," a Danish-built diesel cargo vessel with about six passenger cabins.

The two-and-a-half-day sea voyage was almost incredibly cheap, 300 baht per person one-way Bangkok-Songkhla all in, with four meals a day (yes, four — including afternoon tea British-style, brought to us on deck), not forgetting morning coffee. The distance by sea is a little over 700 kilometres — say about 450 miles.

My wife and I boarded the "Bhanurangsri," which was moored on the Thon Buri bank of the river, at about 8.30 on a Sunday morning, and settled into our comfy little cabin. The ship was due to sail at 9 a.m. sharp — and she did. We steamed (or rather, diesel) slowly down the Chao Phya River...As far as the upstream side of the Krung Thep Bridge. And there we stopped.

And stopped... And stopped...

The trouble, apparently, was that they couldn't raise the Krung Thep Bridge to let us through — because of a city-wide power cut. (It was a Sunday, remember).

No one seemed to have any idea how long the power would be off, but everyone was very “jai yen” (“cool-hearted”) about it. We were served a delicious lunch on the top deck, right there in the middle of the Chao Phya River in the heart of Bangkok. It was certainly a rather unusual place to be eating one’s lunch...

Finally at about 2.30 p.m., amid mild cheering, the power came back on. They opened the bridge, and we proceeded on our way — only four hours behind schedule.

The afternoon journey (oops, sorry, *voyage*) down-river was pleasant and placid. We passed the colourful bustling waterfront of Samut Prakan or Paknam, and shortly afterwards on the opposite bank, the gleaming white spire of Phra Samut Chedi to which my wife reverently “wai’d.”

After a brief squally end-of-monsoon rain-shower near the mouth of the river, we moved slowly out into the Gulf of Thailand just as the sun was setting, with the hump-backed island of Koh Si Chang prominent on the horizon to our left (I mean, *to port!*)

Before I had planned the trip, friends had warned me that the sea would most likely be terribly rough at that time of the year; but for some reason I ignored these warnings. And for once, my instinct was right: The sea was as smooth and calm as the proverbial millpond throughout the whole trip.

Dinner that night was served in the ship’s small dining-room (or should I say galley? No, that’s the kitchen, isn’t it?) We were the only cabin passengers on board, although there were a great many less fortunate than us who were travelling steerage — plus all kinds of cargo, from pigs to brand-new road trucks.

So we had the dining-room to ourselves, and the setting and service were splendid, spick-and-span and shipshape. We dined off spotless white linen tablecloths amid polished tea and gleaming brass pillars, served by very attentive stewards in immaculate uniforms.

The whole atmosphere, and the huge silver sugar-bowls in particular, reminded me of my occasional wartime meals in England in Royal Navy and Fleet Air Arm officers’ messes.

All our main meals on the trip were “set meals” — there

was no a-la-carte menu. And indeed none was necessary, for the meals were imaginatively planned so that alternate lunches and dinners consisted of Thai and Western food.

We awoke to brilliant sunshine and a glass-smooth sea. A distant smudge away on the starboard horizon indicated the coastline somewhere around Prachuap Khiri Khan. Breakfast in the teak-and-brass-pillared dining room was very English — bacon and eggs, toast and marmalade, and as much coffee as we wanted.

We had the top deck to ourselves (and indeed the whole forward part of the ship), and it was here that I found a peacefulness such as I could scarcely remember before. An awning sheltered us from the sun, and there was absolutely nothing to do but sit in deckchairs and watch the empty, silent sea glide slowly by. (The "Bhanurangsri's" top speed, the elderly captain told me, was 17 knots, or about 19 miles per hour, but we never went flat out; we proceeded most of the way at a sedate 12 to 15 m.p.h.).

Laddawan read a book, and later told my fortune with the cards; there was so little breeze that she was even able to do this without the cards blowing away.

Lunch was tasty Thai food, served on deck by our ever-attentive and smiling steward. In the afternoon we passed a green, hilly island covered with palm trees, Koh Phangan.

I spent some time in the wheelhouse chatting to the crew, and learnt that because we were four hours late we wouldn't arrive at the next island, Koh Samui, until nearly dusk.

Hardly had we left Koh Phangan behind than we sighted Koh Samui. In those days it wasn't nearly as well known as it is today, but I'd read about it and was quite keen to see it.

The ship anchored about a kilometre offshore as the island had no proper harbour. A motor-launch was waiting to take us and a few other passengers ashore.

The captain glanced at his watch. "Don't be late!" he told us sternly. "We'll stay here exactly an hour — and if you aren't back in time, we shan't wait for you!"

He obviously meant what he said, and feeling a little like guilty school-children, we promised to be back in time.

By the time we stepped ashore it was dusk, and we

couldn't see much of Koh Samui — and anyway there was so little time.

When we were safely back on board, the ship set off southward again, and shortly afterwards we were served a delicious fish dinner on deck.

After dinner Laddawan went to the cabin to read, but I installed myself on the lower deck, right at the front of the ship (in the bow, as we sailors call it). The moon was nearly full, and I began to rub my eyes, for we seemed to be entering fairyland.

In front of us, and on either side, the weird shapes of hundreds of jagged rocky islands loomed up, and we threaded our way between them across the gleaming silver sea. They looked like cleverly lit cardboard silhouettes on the stage. It was pure magic. The phrase that flitted through my mind was "Thousand-Island Dressing"... Perhaps I was still thinking of that delicious dinner.

The magic continued, endlessly it seemed. But I was getting sleepy, and reluctantly went to bed.

The next day was cloudy with a hint of rain. We could see the coast south of Nakhon Si Thammarat quite clearly. The captain said we'd reach Songkhla by midday or soon after.

And so we did, more or less — at 1.30 p.m. to be precise, in pouring rain. We went ashore and were whisked off to the Samila Hotel for three or four more peaceful days by the seashore.

For those who haven't been to Songkhla, I'll just mention three of the many things worth seeing: The miles of quiet sandy beach fringed with tall pines, with views of the two offshore islands known as "The Cat" and "The Mouse"; the park behind the hotel filled with bushes cleverly trimmed in the shapes of animals; and a steepish but quite short climb up a hill not far from the hotel, with a radio mast and ruined temple on top, from which there's a magnificent view in all directions.

It was the first time Laddawan had been so far South. "I like it here," she said, "the people seem so much more relaxed and somehow friendlier than in Bangkok."

We took a taxi to nearby Hat Yai, which was very much less developed then than it is now. In all the streets vendors

were selling apples — shiny red beauties at three baht apiece — and cheap umbrellas from Hong Kong.

My other memory of Hat Yai is of banks: there seemed to be at least one branch of a bank in every street. Even in those days it was evidently a very busy commercial centre.

Finally we left Songkhla for a one-night stopover in Hat Yai, and this time just for a change we went by train. The fare was two baht each for the 30-kilometre journey, which had all the charm of small country branch railway lines everywhere, with the train snaking around hillocks and diving in and out of wooded groves.

After our one-night stay in Hat Yai, we got up very early to catch the regular Transport Company's orange bus for the nine-hour cross-peninsular journey to Phuket. (We'd already booked our bus seats the previous afternoon).

On the dot of 7.15 a.m. the large orange bus, fairly full with an assortment of farmers' wives, small-time businessmen and a few baskets of chickens, pulled out of Hat Yai bus terminal.

Very soon we were tearing along a country road through lovely mountain scenery — and shivering with cold from the draught of fresh early-morning air coming in through the open door and windows!

First stop Phattalung — and soon after that the road started winding its way up the aptly named "Khao Phap Pha" or "Folded Cloth Mountain" range, with wonderful views reminiscent of Switzerland. Then down again, rounding more hairpin bends onto the plain and the attractive provincial town of Trang.

On again, mostly over flat country through rubber plantations, but with occasional rugged mountains towering on both sides of the road. The day grew hotter, and we stopped by the roadside while the driver and conductor got out and had lunch. In fact we all had lunch, with a constant stream of food vendors parading up and down inside the bus.

After about 45 minutes the bus crew returned, and we set off again... And drove for what seemed only a hundred yards or so, then stopped for another half-hour during which the crew took a well-earned siesta.

After we had set off once more, the road plunged up

steeply into more mountains, looping and winding its way through occasional rain-squalls high above the wonderful setting of Phang-nga Bay far below on our left, dotted with fantastic island rock formations.

And so down to the provincial town of Phang-nga, behind which we could see the locally famous mountain shaped like an elephant's back and head, complete with an eye formed by a natural cave running right through the mountain.

On again over the Sarasin Causeway to Phuket Island, and southward through lush rolling countryside to Phuket town.

We arrived at 4.30 p.m., after a 250-mile journey that called for much skill on part of our driver, especially in manoeuvring the large bus on winding, wet, slippery mountain roads.

In fact the thing I found most remarkable about that long ride, apart from the wonderful scenery, was that the same driver took us all the way from Hat Yai to Phuket. I was surprised they didn't have a relief driver.

In those days the Thavorn was Phuket's best hotel by far, and here we had a large, comfortable room and lots of delicious local seafood. We stayed two days, during which it rained almost the whole time in a steady drizzle.

We explored the quaint old town with its own special atmosphere, and one or two of the island's lovely beaches, in a damp half-hearted way.

I remember on Hat Surin Beach seeing something new to me — two or three local women on hands and knees making little pointed "chedi's" or spires in the sand, row after row of them. They seemed in a great hurry to finish them before the tide came in and washed their handiwork away. In reply to my query they told me they were "tam boon" — making merit.

On the morning of our third and last day in Phuket — when, of course, the sun shone brilliantly — we flew home to Bangkok.

We were in thick cloud the whole way, apart from a brief downward glimpse of that same glistening white pagoda opposite Paknam, Samut Chedi, which my wife had "wai'd" reverently from the ship, 10 days before...

## Miss Prateep

“She’s just a plain girl who grew up in the slum, but to more than 60 families in the sprawling Klong Toey ghetto she is like a fairy godmother.”

So wrote reporter Sumit Hemastol in a newspaper article headed “In a class of her own” in July 1973. He went on:

“For 20-year-old Miss Prateep has turned her run down wooden shack that is her home into a school where she is teacher to scores of slum children.

“By day she teaches and in the evening she attends a teachers’ training college to further her studies.”

Sumit ended his article: “Sixty slum children and a dedicated teacher barely out of her teens... Khun Kroo, chok dee na krap!” (“Good luck, Teacher!”)

In fact, Miss Prateep started running her school when she was only 15, but not until Sumit’s article appeared did the outside world hear about her.

Miss Prateep has come a long way since then, and has received world-wide recognition. The 60 children have become more than 1,300 — 800 at primary level, and over 500 at kindergarten, in various slum schools.

She is still pursuing the same aim, with the same singleness of purpose, deep compassion and love for her “brothers and sisters” in the Klong Toey slum which have been her driving force from the start.

I know, for I went to see her early in 1982, and she showed me her latest project, the infants’ day-care nursery — of which more anon.

In spite of her fame Miss Prateep is still utterly unspoilt, and her deep sense of commitment is something for which I can only offer my humble admiration.

Here is her philosophy, as expressed in a small booklet she gave me called “MY EXPERIENCE OF SOCIAL WORK



IN THE SLUM.” I’m quoting from it at some length because she says it so much better than I can.

“PROBLEMS CONCERNING OURSELVES:

“The important one is the problem of deciding how long one can sacrifice oneself for the mass, for children and for the poor. This is the conflict between the common good and the private self.

“People usually start with optimistic evaluation, especially those with little or no experience.

“So when difficulties are encountered, they tend to become frustrated. Dreams dissolve into dependence, and one tends to feel hurt and scared to touch the work again.

“Some people are scared even to analyse the lesson, not daring to blame themselves, but putting the blame on external causes.

“When we start the work, there tend to be many sympathisers and co-workers, but as the work proceeds and becomes harder, there are fewer and fewer helpers... Then we become lonely and ask ourselves ‘Why are we toiling, and for whom?’

“After exhausting work we receive no benefit. Finally the ideal runs dry and effort is neglected and unfulfilled.

“I myself am continuing the effort because of two thoughts. The first is the pity I have for children with no education.

“I used to be poor before, short of books and clothes. Teachers used to beat me because I did not wear clean clothes to school, and I had to leave school because of lack of funds, even though I desperately wanted to study.

“I had to work since very young to collect money for school fees.

“I pitied other slum friends in similar conditions and made up my mind to become a teacher when I grew up... This is the main impetus when I feel sluggish or despondent.

“The other reason is my conviction that if we persevere and apply the correct method, anything can be achieved. ‘Let’s see whether this is impossible,’ has always been my thought.

“One has to sacrifice a lot when one works for the mass.

“When tired, I would ask myself whether I would be

selfish because of some small exhaustion, or would I go on for the sake of the poor and the helpless young...

"Seeing friends of the same generation becoming rich and advancing in social status, I would think back to my relatives, my neighbours. The parents of my tiny pupils. They are still many times poorer and more desperate than myself. Shall I reap the benefit myself and float away from them, or shall I stay and help them?"

"When one is young, one can work for society without thinking much about oneself. Once you reach the age to start your own family, you have to make a clear-cut decision about the future, whether you will stay with the poor and the helpless children, or accumulate wealth for yourself and your small private family.

"I have decided to choose the first."

Thailand is many times the richer because of people like Miss Prateep — whose name means "a lamp, a light."



Miss Prateep has won two major international awards: The Magsaysay Award for public service in 1979, and the John D. Rockefeller Third Youth Award in February 1981 for her "outstanding contribution to the welfare of mankind."

With the money from the first award she set up the Duang Prateep Foundation to carry on her work more effectively; the Rockefeller money she has used to set up her latest venture, the nursery care centre or Foundation for Slum Child Care, so that pupils who formerly had to leave school early to look after their younger brothers and sisters while their parents were out at work, can now continue their schooling.

Miss Prateep showed me the nursery centre, a small two-storey house in a pleasant little garden with swings, where 21 little ones from one month to three years old are being cared for.

Miss Salee, a charming young "nanny" aged 24, greeted us; she was holding a pale, sickly-looking infant with no hair.

"Two years old," said Miss Prateep. "Malnutrition. But we'll get him right, in time."

With great love and tenderness she then took the poor little thing in her own arms while the smiling Miss Salee showed me the spotless upstairs room with a few more babies in cribs. A slum mother was there, one of the community volunteers who give two days a month to help in the nursery.

Life goes on; the slum is like a monster, devouring money and help almost as fast as it is poured in. But Miss Prateep and her helpers are slowly gaining over the monster, over the apathy.

She needs still more help; in cash, kind, services, whatever.

If you go and see her, she'll be delighted. And you will surely be touched by her sincerity, the warmth of her personality — and the sheer power of her goodness.

## From Pinewood Studios to Phang-nga Bay

It's all rather a long time ago now. But some of the unfilmed and off-the-record things that happened during Secret Agent 007's visit to Thailand were amusing enough to be worth telling again.

As it turned out, the movie in question. "The Man with the Golden Gun," wasn't one of the major James Bond money-spinning films; but that's the way it is in movie-making. If every producer knew during shooting that his film was going to be a smash-hit at the box-office, well... There'd be no bad movies, would there?

Anyway, for the location scenes the filming was to be done in Thailand — mainly on one very scenic little island, Khao Ping-gan in Phang-nga Bay near Phuket.

Before Roger Moore, Britt Ekland and the other big names came out here, an advance army of studio carpenters and the like were sent over from Pinewood Studios in England to prepare the "set" and improve on nature by adding artificial boulders, building the master-mind Scaramanga's hideout on the island and so on.

I met one of the advance film crew, a carpenter or "chippy" as they are known in British film studios, lying on the beach on Khao Ping-gan Island and chewing nonchalantly on a leg of chicken. "How do you like Thailand?" I asked him.

He went on chewing silently for a moment, thinking over my question, then said in a Cockney accent, "Mmm... 's not a bad little plice, reely, I s'pose."

My goodness, I thought, some people just don't know when they're lucky. Here was this English studio carpenter, taking it easy in one of the loveliest places in the world — a

spot which tourists pay thousands of dollars to come and see — and all he could think of was “not a bad little plice.”

I was on Khao Ping-gan (“the hill of leaning rocks”) purely by chance that day, on a tourist day-trip from Phuket. I knew, of course, like almost everyone else in Thailand at that time, that 007 in the person of Roger Moore and a whole crew of other actors, directors, assistant directors, sheen-sifters (sorry; scene-shifters) and other specialists in the art of film-making would soon be descending on Thailand for the filming of the much-publicised “Man with the Golden Gun.”

But it wasn't until it was all over, and everybody had gone back to their native mist-shrouded England, that I had an opportunity to hear from the local Thai production manager, an old friend of mine, the curious anecdotes I shall now relate.

Khao Ping-gan, where most of the location shooting for the film was done, is one of those spectacular limestone bluffs that rise sheer out of the sea in Phang-nga Bay. The only way to reach it is by boat, a journey of some 45 minutes (if the boat is a long-tail one) from the nearest mainland point accessible by road, the Old Phang-nga Customs House.

So, naturally, when the local film production crew headed by the production manager were getting everything ready for the time when the people from England would be coming, one of their first tasks was to arrange daily seaborne transport for them — camera crew, director, actors, the lot. All kinds of boats were hired — long-tail boats, charcoal boats, fishing trawlers, even government boats from the Old Customs House.

There were about 40 long-tail boats for hire. And that was when the trouble started; for the film unit found they would only be needing 20, which they promptly hired for the duration of the filming.

The remaining 20 or so unhired boatman were... Well, they weren't exactly overjoyed. During the first day or two of filming, they made their feelings quite clear in the most direct possible way: They jammed their empty boats against those carrying the film people so they couldn't get out of the narrow channel into midstream, and threw in various other

harassing and obstructionist tactics as well.

So much precious and expensive time was being wasted that the local production team soon got the message. It was that well known ploy, a protection racket.

"OK," said my friend the Thai production manager to the disgruntled unhired boatmen, "150 baht a day to leave us alone...?"

"No way!" (or its equivalent in Thai), they flashed back. "Four hundred baht!"

This was so ridiculous it was almost funny. Even the HIRED boats were only getting 300 baht a day!

Finally 150 baht was agreed on. "Right, that's settled," said the production manager briskly; he had a thousand and one other things to see to. "Now, how many of you are there?"

It seemed no one had a clear idea; estimates varied from 28 boats to 43.

"Well, if you can't even make up your minds how many you are, we shan't pay you anything at all!" snapped the production manager, his patience almost at an end (and he is a very patient man).

And then, do you know, the strangest thing happened — something very Thai.

The unhired boatmen's resentment suddenly vanished, melted away into thin air. They smiled, and accepted — NOTHING!

Perhaps they were simply weary of arguing, and of the whole business; but anyway, from then on they never gave the film people any more trouble at all.

There was another example of this "protection racket": A local businessman owned the concession to gather all the birds' nests on Khao Ping-gan, the main filming location. Not just ordinary birds' nests, or course; these were the much-prized and very expensive variety used in that favourite Chinese delicacy, birds' nest soup.

Like practically everybody else in Thailand at the time, this local businessman knew about the impending arrival of Roger Moore, Britt Ekland, Christopher Lee and all the other British film people. As soon as he knew that "his" island had been picked for the filming, he was right there on Khao Ping-

gan, waiting to greet the advance Thai production team.

"I must tell you that I have to put up the scaffolding to gather the birds' nests on this island immediately," he told them solemnly.

"But that will ruin the film shots," protested the production manager. "I wonder whether you would be kind enough to wait for just a little while — only 10 days, then our filming will be finished. Do you think you could possibly do that?"

"No, I'm afraid not," came the answer. "Surely you know the time for gathering the nests is critical; if we waited 10 days, they'd be well past their prime."

So once again it was the same ploy. A sharp ten-minute bargaining session began on the beach.

The production manager asked the businessman how much he thought the bird's nests would bring him in net profits; back, quick as a flash, came the answer: 60,000 baht.

Trying hard to suppress a grin, the production manager asked him to work it out again more carefully; and it appeared there had indeed been a slight slip in arithmetic. The correct value was 10,000 baht...

Finally the businessman settled for a paltry 4,000 baht.

And indeed, he was lucky to get even that; because he knew, and the production manager knew, and he knew that the production manager knew... That the season for gathering birds' nests on the island would not start for at least another two months — long after all the filming was over and everyone had gone back to England!

When I said that the Thai crew were responsible for the smooth running of everything during the filming, I was of course speaking relatively; unforeseen incidents were bound to crop up, but by all accounts the Thai crew did a fine job.

With a mixed Thai and British crew, neither nationality speaking or understanding the other's language, it was absolutely essential to have an interpreter. This was even more necessary down south around Phang-nga Bay, where local people totally unfamiliar with the English tongue were temporarily taken on the film company's payroll.



The interpreter seems to have been a real “Born Loser.” He probably had a more miserable time during the filming than anyone else in the team. Whenever there was any argument or misunderstanding, he was always the poor unfortunate in the middle, getting abuse from both sides. Anything that went wrong was somehow always his fault. He was even roughed up more than once by the local men, who imagined — quite mistakenly — that he was double-crossing them.

Finally in desperation he bought himself a gun (not a golden one) for self-protection. But even this turned sour on him; in fact, it nearly proved his undoing.

He always carried the gun in his trouser pocket, and one day when he was trying to get the cap off a soft-drink bottle and didn't have an opener, he used a hammer. Unfortunately, on the back-swing the hammer accidentally hit the gun in his pocket... Off it went, wounding him severely in the leg. The poor chap spent the next two weeks in Phuket Provincial Hospital...

In the picturesque provincial town of Phang-nga, where most of the British film technicians were staying during the filming, the crew found to their delight that there were four expert tailors' shops where they could get fitted out with handsome made-to-measure tropical-weight trousers and sports shirts. Prices were very cheap too — only 60 baht for trousers and 40 baht for a shirt (that was in 1974).

Delighted with the high quality of the material and workmanship, and especially with the attractive Thai designs of the cotton shirts, most of the crew bought a new set of trousers and shirt every day!

Perhaps they shouldn't have been too surprised (but they were) when the prices suddenly shot up overnight by 200 per cent, at three of the four tailors...

But those foolish three tailors were also in for a shock; their greed had killed the golden goose well and truly, and their very lucrative “farang” market vanished as quickly as their prices had gone up. The film men simply transferred their custom to tailor number four, who very wisely had NOT put up his prices... He soon made himself a small fortune, as you can imagine.

And when the location filming was finished and it was time for the "farangs" to say goodbye and head back for England, the wise little tailor of Phang-nga took each of them in his car the 35 miles to Phuket airport, complete with his wife and daughters. There were almost tearful "goodbyes" and lots of "wais." Customers who buy a new shirt and trousers every day for several weeks on end don't often come the way of a remote upcountry tailor....

Some street scenes were also filmed in Bangkok. As stipulated by British film union rules, morning and afternoon coffee-breaks were provided for the film crew; tea, coffee and soft drinks were supplied by the film company, plus a tempting array of smoked salmon and caviar sandwiches, pastries and what-have-you.

During the first few days' filming in Bangkok, stalls for the coffee-breaks were set up on the pavement conveniently near the scenes being shot. Occasionally it happened quite by chance that the stalls were near bus stops. Passengers getting off buses rubbed their eyes: Evidently some big-hearted, public-spirited philanthropist was giving away free food and drink, and very posh stuff too! Without pausing to enquire what it was all in aid of, they joined in the fun and helped themselves liberally to the free food and drink... That is, until the Thai production manager suddenly found out what was happening, and quickly put a stop to it!

Some scenes were shot in front of the Rajdamnern boxing stadium, where a hot curry vendor had his stall; the film people were anxious for him to move because he was blocking the view for an essential scene.

"Do you think you could possibly set up your stall somewhere else?" He was asked politely.

"Sorry," came the answer, "I'm well-known around here; lots of regular customers. If I move, I'll lose a whole day's takings — that's 5,000 baht...."

Once again, as he had done at Phang-nga, the production manager quickly suppressed a grin of total disbelief; but he got the message.

"Would you take a bit less?" he asked. "After all, your food won't be wasted — you can sell it tomorrow."

"No, I can't! Has to be eaten fresh; doesn't keep."

Long sigh. "Very well; we'll pay you 5,000 baht to move. But you must give us all your curry, so we can at least use it for our film crew."

"Not on your life! If you want me to move, you must pay me 5,000 baht AND I'm keeping my curry as well!"

Poor production manager; he knew when he was beaten... Sadly he counted out the money...

Finally there was an unscripted scene at the Floating Market.

A mid-west American sheriff and his wife were supposed to be on holiday in Bangkok, and the script called for a baby elephant to come and cadge for tidbits; the sequence was to end with the sheriff spluttering in the canal as if the baby elephant had pushed him in.

What actually happened was that the young animal became so genuinely enraged by all the shouting and excitement during filming that it really did shove the actor into the canal good and hard — and much sooner than anyone was expecting. But the cameraman managed to grab a shot of totally unrehearsed flailing limbs that was far better than the director had hoped for!

## Out and about

THE DATE: Sunday January 3, 1982. WEATHER: Sunny and mild. No — on second thoughts, make that “HOT!”

Since 1977 I've only been outside Bangkok twice; staying at home is easier, safer, and much more comfortable.

The last time was on September 13, 1981, when I went with the Siam Society on an unexpectedly slippery and mud-ridden safari through the orchards of Thon Buri — the first time I'd been outside the city for four years.

And then I did it again.

In the opposite direction, this time — past Phra Khanong Bridge and out into the wilds of Samrong. Although we were only away from home for two hours, quite a lot of things happened...

The occasion itself was a simple one: My wife Laddawan and I went to donate some money towards the construction of a new “sala” or pavilion at Wat Suan Soam — the Orange Grove Temple which is mentioned in the book “Thai Ways.” It's the little country temple near which my wife and her sister were born and brought up, and the only other time I had ever been there was for their grandmother's cremation in 1968. So I was curious to see whether the surroundings had become more built-up, what with all the new factories that have sprung up in the area.

And I also wanted to see the shophouse or “hong tao” which I bought for Laddawan in 1980, built on land belonging to the same temple, and in which her sister Sumalee and three of her four children have been living since the banyan tree fell down in a storm and demolished their previous living quarters in the compound of our rented house near Soi Thong Lor.

At 2.30 p.m. four of us set off in my stepson Jiap's clapped-out gas-guzzling old Fiat 1800: Laddawan, Jiap, his

current girlfriend Tukata, and myself.

Before long we were driving due south, along Sukhumvit Highway towards Paknam. I was sitting in front next to Jiap, and the sun was coming in smack onto us through the windscreen, producing a hot, sticky "greenhouse effect;" during a month of cold weather, I'd almost forgotten that old familiar sweaty feeling...

Anyway, we passed through busy Samrong and a little further on we turned off down Poochaosamingprai Road, and then along a still very countrified (and bumpy) Soi Suan Soam. We passed only two factories, both of them clean, modern, surrounded by lush greenery and without any sign of pollution, and soon we arrived at Wat Suan Soam.

The little temple was just as rural as I remembered it dimly from 14 years earlier. Trees all around, apart from the tiny village community occupying one soi opposite — and the only chimney in sight was that of the temple crematorium.

We knelt briefly before the Abbot in his quarters, "wai'd", prostrated ourselves, gave him our donation and chatted for a short while.

Laddawan says she remembers the same Abbot as a very young monk more than 35 years ago, when she was only five or six years old; she often wore red, and he would call her over, "Daeng! Daeng!" — which means "Red" — and give her cakes and sweets.

Then two "dek-wat" or temple-boys took us to see the half-built new "sala."

After that we left the temple and crossed the road to see Laddawan's "hong tao" — the first time I'd seen it. I felt a sudden pang of pity — it's so narrow for four people to live in, even though there are two storeys; but there was Sumalee's younger daughter Mook, placidly doing her homework...

Then we set off home.

By one of those curious twists of fate (or more accurately, the rotation of the earth) the sun had now moved further round to the west; so it was on our left as we drove northward. Jiap's front left-hand window is permanently jammed shut, so once again there I was, with the same old "greenhouse effect"...

However, there was still more heat to come...

Not understanding Thai when it's spoken between Thais, I didn't grasp why we turned off the main road in the centre of Samrong, and down a small soi, until Laddawan explained that Jiap was just going to see a friend for a few minutes...

We stopped outside a pleasant modern wooden house in the countryside — where Jiap had spent the previous night at a New Year's party. After we'd hung around in the garden for a few minutes, Jiap picked up a large square galvanised-iron bin and, slightly to my consternation, put it in the boot of the car (with the bootflap tilted up above it at an alarming angle).

I was even more unnerved when the son of the house, Jiap's friend Sompong, got in the back of the car with Tukata — and Laddawan piled in front with Jiap and me!

Of course it's nice to be close to one's wife... But not to have her practically in one's lap in a steaming-hot "greenhouse"! We sat there sweating profusely while Jiap drove slowly along the soi....

(It's also nice to know, as of course I do know, that Jiap is a naturally helpful boy, always anxious to do a friend a good turn — but, boy, was it ever hot!)

I had a sinking feeling we were taking Sompong and his metal bin all the way home to our house (though I never remembered seeing that bin before; surely it wasn't ours?) — but it turned out that we were only taking the bin as far as Samrong market.

Even that short distance seemed an eternity, with the Sunday afternoon shoppers thronging the road to the busy market under the bridge.

Finally we arrived, and got rid of the bin. But Sompong now had to be taken home again. Another sweltering drive, with Laddawan and me, crammed like a pair of sweaty sardines — until, blissfully, we reached Sompong's house, dropped him off, and Laddawan was able to move into the back with Tukata again.

After that, the drive home was more or less plain sailing, if you'll pardon the mixed metaphor. That is, apart from being stuck immediately behind a stalled car on the incline going

up Phra Khanong Bridge, and a bit later on our horn jamming, which meant business with a screwdriver...

We planned to go to the donation ceremony for the new "sala" at Wat Suan Soam the following Sunday. But we didn't go. Let me try to explain why...

My wife said there was no point in our going. When I asked why not, she said, "You know Thai people — we're always changing our minds!"

Asked what she meant, she said she was referring to herself. But I still wanted to know why.

So she patiently explained that she had originally thought the initiation ceremony for the new "sala" was to be held that Sunday; but then she realised that it couldn't possibly be, as the "sala" was only half-finished. That particular ceremony, the "yok chor fah" or raising of the new "sala's" gable, probably wouldn't take place for perhaps another year, depending on how much more money could be raised and how soon.

My wife had in fact confused it with the annual four-day temple fair, which is what took place at Wat Suan Soam the week after our visit. And in fact she went to this by herself on the following Wednesday.

This fair was combined, as every year and at every Thai Buddhist temple, with two religious ceremonies held for the express purpose of raising temple funds — and, of course, for making merit in doing so. One of these was the "Tod Pabpa" ceremony. Combined with this was the ceremony of "pit tong" or applying gold leaf to a venerated Buddha image in the temple.

I won't go into the details of that; it's too long. I'll just mention in passing that once again, for the thousandth time, I learnt something new about Thai religious customs through this conversation with my wife; something maybe she assumed I already knew — or more likely, something it never occurred to her to mention to me.

I'd always thought that devout members of the public applied gold leaf to Buddha images in any and every temple at any time, whenever they went to the temple; but that, apparently, is only true of particularly venerated images in



equally famous temples — such as Luang Por Sothorn in Wat Sothorn at Chachoengsao. At smaller or less important temples, the applying of gold leaf only takes place once a year — because at other times there's no gold leaf on sale nearby.

I hope I've got that right...

## Somsak and Udom

I've always had a specially soft spot for Thai youngsters at school. They seem so keen to learn, and particularly to learn English.

I once knew two delightful 16-year-old schoolboys, in the days when my knowledge of Thai was almost non-existent; but their English was so fluent that it didn't matter. I'll call them Somsak and Udom (not their real names).

As it turned out, I got to know both of them very well, especially Somsak. He was chairman of his school science club and I helped him in choosing some films for the school's science exhibition.

They were both obviously very clever boys. After the exhibition was over they invited me to go on their three-day science club outing. I felt really honoured, as I was the only outsider invited; all the rest were schoolboys (65 of them) and three teachers.

I was also slightly scared at the prospect, because their description of the trip sounded a bit rough in places; but nevertheless I accepted gratefully.

We set off in a comfortable hired bus together with a police-car escort, all of which Somsak had apparently organised on his own.

This was before the Asian Highway to Chiang Mai had been built, and we drove slowly along a narrow winding country road to Nakhon Sawan, where we spent the night in a deserted girls' vocational school (it was during the school holidays).

I had an uncomfortable night in a huge but stifling classroom containing a demonstration bed completely made up in Western style with sheets, blankets and pillow, all covered with a thick sheet of transparent plastic — for teaching home economics! I tossed and turned on another

bed, and didn't get much sleep.

Early next morning we climbed up a great many steps to a temple on top of a nearby hill from which there was a lovely view of the Wang, Yom and Nan rivers which join together to form the Chao Phya.

After breakfast we headed on northwards towards our destination, the EGAT Bhumibol Dam in Tak Province — a slow, bumpy ride over a wide and extremely dusty earth track which was later to become the foundations of the Asian Highway. The only traffic we passed was bulldozers and graders. The scenery was lovely — when we could see it through the dust.

Finally we turned off left along a track which took us deep into the mountains. Here the Bhumibol Dam complex is situated in a beautiful valley, complete with a guest house with — joy of joys! — an airconditioned bedroom and private shower. Did I ever sleep well that night!

Next morning we were given a guided tour of EGAT's turbo-generators, then a short drive up a twisty mountain road to the artificial lake at the top of the huge dam.

Suddenly rounding a bend, we all let out a gasp... it was a fantastic view. The lake fringed with mountains reminded me of my own schooldays in Switzerland.

EGAT took us on a delightful two-hour trip on the lake in their comfortable guest barge. For many of the boys this was their first trip outside Bangkok. "Oh, Sir!" one of them cried out to me ecstatically, "We are in heaven!"

During the long ride home, we did what most schoolboys do, the world over: We sang songs. They had sets of English song-sheets, and I remember singing "Clementine" lustily with them.

Later, Somsak was awarded a Thai Government scholarship to study in Europe. After he went, we corresponded fairly regularly. Udom, meanwhile, was studying medicine here in Thailand.

As time went on, my correspondence with Somsak lapsed. I rather think it was my fault. It seemed as if we'd lost touch completely, which made me sad. To be candid, I hate writing letters; but I also don't like losing touch with good friends.

Then one day my picture was in the paper with an account of how I'd got stuck in the mud in the orchards of Thon Buri. Two days later I received a phone call.

"Hello, is that Mr Segaller?" a faintly familiar voice asked. "This is Somsak! I saw your picture in the paper!"

"Somsak! Good heavens — are you back in Thailand?" I asked, rather stupidly since he obviously wasn't phoning from the moon. "How long have you been back?"

"Three years!" Somsak replied. "I had no idea you were still here until I saw your picture!"

"My goodness, you must be about 26 by now!" I said, arithmetic not being one of my stronger points. "I'm 30!" he answered, laughing.

He told me he now has a rather senior position in a key government organisation. Not long afterwards, he came to my home on a Sunday.

When we met — the first time for 11 years — I didn't think he'd changed much, and he said the same about me, too. We talked and laughed for five solid hours, mostly about his life and work in Europe. He told me Udom was now a doctor in a remote upcountry district.

After that enjoyable Sunday, Somsak phoned again to say Udom was in town, and could they come round to my place that evening, as Udom was going overseas for a year?

I said sure, and three of them came — Udom's delightful wife as well. (Somsak isn't married yet, but he's kind of semi-engaged).

I found Udom had changed rather more than Somsak. He's not just a doctor, he's director of a small hospital. Although he was just as friendly as when he was a schoolboy, he now has a seriousness which reflects not only the responsibility of his job (Somsak has just as much responsibility in his own field too) but I suspect also an underlying deep compassion for the poverty and sickness he has come to know. But he didn't talk about it.

Anyway, it's good to know Somsak is around, and we'll be meeting again before long to talk about all the experiences he still hasn't had enough time to describe to me...

## Teaching film-making at “Chula”

Turning out an old cupboard one day, I was suddenly confronted with reminders of the past, as one usually is on such occasions. I found something which seemed interesting, so I decided to write about it.

The items in question were a whole pile of rather dusty exam papers (or rather, answers to exam papers) from the time when I taught film-making at the Faculty of Education at Chulalongkorn University. They covered a period from about 1968 to 1974, and they brought back memories of the amusing things that happened during what was in retrospect a very happy time — for me, at any rate, and I hope for my students too.

I should first explain that I haven't always been a writer working on the staff of a newspaper. Most of my career was spent in making films — documentary, educational and scientific. (During World War II I was making a very special kind of training films for the RAF, on a subject so top-secret that I wasn't even allowed to tell my parents about it. But now, after 40 years, I think it's safe to reveal the secret: it was called RADAR!)

After the war I had 21 fascinating years working for the Shell Film Unit, which took me to places as far apart as California, Portugal, Holland and Tunisia. Finally, having worked for some 30 years on professional 35mm film gauge, I found myself in Bangkok working on the humbler but much cheaper (and just as effective for teaching purposes) 8mm.

The films were of a special type called “film loops,” “cassette films” or “cartridge films.” They were in some ways the forerunner of today's videotape cassettes, but they were silent and only ran for a maximum of four minutes, after which they automatically started again without rewinding. This made them useful as classroom teaching aids: there

was no language problem, and instant repetition helped the students to learn.

During those six years my job was to teach graduate students in “Chula’s” Faculty of Education, as well as some undergraduates in the Faculty of Science, how to make these “film loops” from scratch. And although there was no language problem in using the end product, this was by no means true of my instruction in how to make them!

I’ll never forget one pretty science undergraduate called Noppamas — partly because her name reminds me of the legendary 13th century Nang Noppamas who invented the first “krathong” of the type which are floated on rivers, klongs (and flooded streets) on Loy Krathong Day.

This latter-day Noppamas was one of a group of four girls whom I was teaching how to use the camera, tripod, lights, etc, and initiating into the mysteries of animation, slow-motion and time-lapse filming. At that time my knowledge of the Thai language was even worse than it is now — and that’s not saying much!

Anyway I was speaking English (slowly, and as distinctly as I could) but it soon became apparent that Noppamas couldn’t understand me. After a while she rather shyly asked me “Khor hy Ajarn pood passa Thai” (“Teacher, please speak Thai”). So I switched over to Thai — only to hear Noppamas say after a few moments, “Khor hy Ajarn pood passa Angkrit!” (“Teacher, please speak English!”) This was naturally greeted by peals of laughter all round, and my ego took quite a tumble... (Khun Noppamas, if by any chance you read this, I hope you have forgiven me for being unable to explain things to you in either of our two languages).

The first thing my students had to learn was how to draw rough storyboards as working “blueprints” for the films they were going to make. During term-time I let each group of four students choose their own subjects for filming.

For the end-of-semester exams I had to set a written paper, and I always included a question which read: “Draw a story-board for a film or film loop on one of the following topics: (a)...(b)... etc, or any other subject you like.” It was these old exam storyboards which I found in the cupboard.

The special film techniques which I taught my students

can be done just as easily on 8mm as on 35mm — animation, slow-motion, time-lapse (which speeds up movements too slow to be seen with the eye), huge close-ups using a simple magnifying-glass stuck on the end of the camera lens with scotch tape — a technique I learnt from a professor of physics in Israel — and even filming through a microscope.

The results of the students' skill and ingenuity were at times extremely beautiful to watch on the screen. A group of four undergraduate girl science students filmed the activities of a colony of red ants in the Science Faculty garden, and got some excellent big closeups of a single ant scurrying to and fro and filling the whole width of the screen.

Another group — girls again! — decided to film a bird (I think it was a duckling) hatching out from an egg. Of course one can't predict the exact moment when a happy event of this nature will take place; and as things turned out, the girls came bursting breathlessly into the classroom where I was giving a lecture, shouting in Thai, "Ajarn, quick! We need the camera — tripod — lights...! It's going to hatch right away!" Complete chaos reigned for a few minutes while they set everything up outside the classroom door — after which I went on with my lecture...

The 8mm gauge is the cheapest and simplest there is. Mostly we used high-quality cameras courtesy of UNESCO, the Colombo Plan and the Education Faculty's audio-visual Education Department whose graduate students I taught. But I also encouraged my students to bring their own movie cameras, or any they could borrow. As a result, we had a most weird assortment of cameras, some of them the like of which I'd never seen before.

On the whole these borrowed cameras worked quite adequately: but one day a girl student said, "Ajarn, this camera belongs to my aunt. She has kindly lent it to me. Do you think we can use it?"

I took a look at it and swallowed hard; it looked even less like anything I'd ever seen. "Have you got the instruction booklet?" I asked hopefully. "Oh, no, that was lost a long time ago," she replied. "This camera's rather old."

I looked at the instructions stamped on the inside of the



camera door and at various places on the outside; they were in a strange script which yet somehow looked vaguely familiar. Suddenly realisation dawned on me — it was a Russian camera! “I’m sorry,” I told her. “I can’t read Russian and I simply haven’t the faintest idea how to use this camera.” So she took it back to her aunt...

Some of my graduate students were already teachers or university lecturers, one of them with 10 years’ teaching experience in Korat, they had come back to “Chula” to study for their Master of Education degree, majoring in audio-visual education.

One of my earliest such students was a charming and talented lady named Mrs Gobporn. She decided to do her entire Master’s thesis on the subject I was teaching — the making and use of 8mm film loops.

She studied privately with me every day for a whole academic year. Since her other major subject in the Vocational Education Department of the Ministry of Education was Food and Nutrition, she embarked on the making of two film loops — “How to make pineapple jam” and “How to make tomato ketchup.”

In the scene where the pineapple jam is boiled, a process which as far as I remember takes three hours, she decided to speed up the action on the screen by using the “time-lapse” technique — that is, filming one single frame every minute; the whole three hours would then be condensed into about eight seconds on the screen.

This turned out very successful (after a false start in which it was discovered that a vital ingredient had been left out); the reduction in volume as the jam gradually set was quite striking.

Inevitably when filming something of this kind, one has to do a few “retakes”, and after Mrs Gobporn had finished her filming, I practically lived on her delicious pineapple jam for quite a long time!

Then there was Ajarn Ora, who taught English in one of Bangkok’s universities. She decided to make a rather unusual film loop on “The Present Tenses,” of which the English language has four — Present Simple, Present

Continuous, Present Perfect and Present Perfect Continuous.

She designed simple but effective cartoon animation to illustrate sentences such as “The sun *rises* every day” (Present Simple) — the sun was a huge orange-red cut-out disc of paper which rose slowly from behind a rural Thai landscape with palm trees and a farmhouse; and “He can’t go out because it *is raining*” (Present Continuous) — the rain outside the window was animated on sheets of acetate.

It took weeks of preparation and a whole arduous week to film (animation is very slow work, but the results when projected onto the silver screen flash before your eyes in just a few seconds).

After Ajarn Ora had finished her work, the film was sent away for processing. After 10 days, back it came: I was luckily alone when, with trembling fingers, I threaded it into the projector and switched on...

My heart sank into my boots and right through the soles — the first bit of animation was there, though badly “fogged”; after that — nothing, just clear, transparent film through the whole roll. Somehow, I had accidentally exposed the film to bright light, either before it was loaded into the camera or after it was taken out.

I broke the awful news to Ora next time she came. But all was well eventually; we refilmed the whole thing, and this time it came out beautifully. Later she used her film successfully as part of her English teaching.

The film subjects chosen by the students covered quite a wide range. Going through the old story-boards, I found “How to propagate papaya trees from seed,” “The Thai Wedding Ceremony,” “How to cook ‘Krong Kraeng’,” “How to make a ranad” (a classical Thai musical instrument), “How to make a simple electric motor,” and “The silk screen process.” Other subjects were way outside my own knowledge: “Wax-embedding of tissue followed by sectioning by microtome,” and “How to make a slide by the Feulgen Squash method,” whatever that is.

The films that I found the most fascinating were those showing the delicate, intricate, purely Thai arts and crafts —

movements of the Thai Dance, How to make a “baisri”, How to make a “krathong,” and many more which I’ve long since forgotten.

I’ve already mentioned my very close friend and one-time student Sasithorn in this book. She’s now a Ph.D., married to an Englishman and doing post-doctoral research in California. But when I first met her she was a first-year undergraduate in the Marine Science Department of “Chula’s” Faculty of Science.

Entering my room after lunch one day, I found a young lady waiting for me. “Hallo, Ajarn Segaller,” she said with that wonderful smile of hers, and continued in perfect English, “I’m Sasithorn. I’m your new student. I want to make a film about hydra.”

“Oh,” I answered rather lamely. “What is hydra?” “Oh, don’t you know? It’s a small marine creature about six millimetres long. I want to film its digestive process.” I gulped, but a quick calculation showed me that we could indeed make this with the equipment we had.

Well, Sasithorn did film the hydra and its digestive tract, and a beautiful film it turned out to be, for hydra-lovers at any rate...And a wonderful friend and regular correspondent Sasithorn still is.

An all-male group of four graduate students once had me slightly scared when they announced the subject of the film they intended to make: The Care, Maintenance and *Use* of...the Revolver!

All went well with the Care and Maintenance part, which they filmed in the room placed at my disposal at “Chula”. (The making of every film always took several weeks, because the students only had three hours a week allotted for this subject in their schedule).

Finally they finished, and I asked rather nervously, “Where are you going to film the *use* of the revolver?” I hoped they weren’t going to suggest doing it in my room! They all had a good laugh at this, and asked me if I’d be free for an upcountry outing the following Saturday. I said yes, I would be.

Off we all went in someone’s car. It was a typically Thai and thoroughly enjoyable day’s outing. We went to Chon

Buri, then turned left inland to Phanat Nikhom. We stopped on the way and called at the Nai Amphoe's house (I think he was the uncle of one of the students). Then we headed out into wild and lovely country. They knew the exact spot, a delightful open clearing dotted with trees and shrubs and with views into the distance.

On one of the trees they fixed the target. Then they set up the camera on the tripod, and the shooting began — in both senses of the word. BANG! BANG! BANG! went the revolver. "Whirr-rr..." went the camera. I was cowering behind a nearby rock; but I needn't have worried — they were all expert marksmen, and every shot hit the target (and as we later saw on the screen, every film "shot" was in sharp focus, too!)

After the smoke had cleared and there was no more film left, we had a splendid picnic lunch, went to the kamnan's (tambon head's) house — another uncle, I think — and so eventually back home...

That was just one more delightful episode during my film-teaching days at "Chula". But perhaps the group I remember as fondly as any were a mixed fivesome of young men and women who decided to film the process of mushroom cultivation.

They found a suitable farm near Pathum Thani just north of Bangkok; the farmer gave them permission to film, and they all set off one weekend (without me, this time; they were fully skilled in handling the camera and other film equipment). Afterwards they took the film directly to the processing shop in Bangkok, and when it was ready they brought it to me.

"How did it go?" I asked them. "Well, Ajarn," they answered with what seemed like a mixture of embarrassment and suppressed amusement, "Just put the film in the projector and run it." I did so.

There on the screen I saw the action (including an excellent speeded-up "time-lapse" shot of a mushroom growing and swelling like a balloon being blown up) — but there was something faintly odd about the farm-workers spreading out the straw and so on.

Suddenly I said to one of the girls, "Why, Tuanchai, isn't

that you?" This question was greeted with a loud burst of laughter. I looked some more. "And — why, Opas, that's you!" "Yes, Ajarn — it's all of us!" they said. "When we got there, none of the farm-workers was willing to be filmed. They were shy, we think. So we all put on their clothes and they showed us what to do — and we took turns filming each other!"

Anyway, after it had been edited, that turned out a very successful film too...

Happy days.

## Some Thai ways at home

Here are a few assorted trivia — things that have happened at home and elsewhere.

I was once giving an English lesson to a Thai lady at my home. After we'd finished, she said goodbye and went outside onto the verandah.

"Why, where are my shoes?" she asked. I hadn't the faintest idea, so I called my wife. With unerring instinct, like Sherlock Holmes, she went straight to the heart of the mystery immediately.

"I think it may be one of the dogs," she said, and set off on a tour round the outside of the house. I knew exactly which of our six dogs she meant: The male member of our pair of twin puppies, black-and-white, adorable, but highly mischievous and utterly untrustworthy.

Sure enough, my wife found one of the shoes at the back of the house. I started to apologise profusely and offered to buy my student a new pair. "Never mind!" said she goodnaturedly. "They were only old shoes anyway, and I have another pair in the car." She got in and drove off.

It was just as well they were old shoes, because after she'd gone my wife found the other shoe, or what was left of it, in some obscure spot right at the bottom of our large garden... It now looked more like the remains of a half-eaten pork chop.

From time to time we have an interesting break in the routine of work at Allied Newspapers in the form of a school visit. Such visits usually consist of a small number of boys and girls in the M. 3 to M. 5 range, that is from roughly 16 to 20 years old, and one or more teachers, who are given a short guided-tour-cum-talk on how a newspaper is put together.

I got roped into helping out with one of these visits. It was

a school with what is surely one of the longest school names in the world: Rachaprachasamasai (pause for breath) Ratchadapisek School. And it was almost certainly the biggest guided tour we've ever held — there were some 350 students altogether.

The four or five of us who were "guides" started off with the best of intentions. "OK, you take this group and start off first, and I'll follow with my lot in a few minutes," we said to one another.

Alas, our well-intentioned if somewhat hurriedly improvised plans didn't come off quite as smoothly and efficiently as we wished... The rather complex geography of our premises, with every room connected to every other room via a maze of passages, plus the intense curiosity and interest of our young charges in everything they saw, soon turned our "guided tour" into a relatively unguided one. It was like trying to control a swarm of bees in Hampton Court Maze or Lumpini Park. Notebooks, notebooks... Everything we told them and showed them was feverishly jotted down by each student. I must say it was all a lot of fun, if also a little tiring. The students seemed to be everywhere — except, usually, where we wanted them to be.

"Show them the library," our Managing Editor had suggested, and this I tried hard but in vain to do.

Before long many of the students had become scattered into small groups of close buddies, and whenever one of these groups swept past me I implored them, "wouldn't you like to see our library?" But they were always in hot pursuit of something else — our latest computer technology, or the pasting-up process, or whatever. I never did get to show anyone the library...

Finally they all went, and I sank gratefully into a chair. But not for long. "Hang on," said a colleague, "there's another bus-load coming..."

Any dream about fire is well-known among Thai people as being a portent of trouble.

Some years ago in the middle of the hot season, my stepson Jiap dreamt our garden fence was on fire. A few days later, he went down with typhoid...

And in October one year during terrible floods, Jiap had a



similar dream — but this time he dreamt his hands were on fire! In retrospect, this was very symbolic, because two days later it was his hands that actually caused the trouble.

To be precise, his hands were on the steering-wheel of his old Fiat car. He was driving down Soi Kluay Nam Thai, taking his aunt Sumalee and his cousin Mook back to their home in Samrong and trying to avoid the deep flooding in the Phra Khanong area.

It was night-time, and the rain was pelting down, making visibility very poor. That was probably why Jiap didn't see the newly-erected dyke made of sandbags which stretched across the road, and which earlier in the day hadn't been there at all. Anyway, he drove smack into the sandbags, skidded, and collided gently with a small bridge.

No one was hurt, and after four months the car was repaired and back on the road again...

They say bad luck always comes in threes. (At least, we British say it; I don't think the Thais say it, but never mind).

One December Jiap decided to have a small end-of-the-year party in our garden, to which he invited "just a very few" of his close pals, male and female — about 30 or 40 of them.

The original plan was that he would ask each guest to contribute 50 baht towards the costs — for such things as food, soft drinks, balloons and so on. (Most of the latter seemed to go bang! while they were being blown up beforehand, shattering the normal peace of my Sunday afternoon).

Two or three nights before the party, Jiap again had a dream about fire. This time he dreamt that the new concrete wall along the northern boundary of our garden was on fire.

However, in this most recent dream Jiap found he was able to put out the fire — which according to Thai belief meant he would be able to overcome the trouble. Just to be on the safe side, he decided to ward off the impending trouble in a very simple way — by NOT asking any of his party guests to contribute any money; which meant that he was out of pocket to the tune of about 1,500 baht...

So much for dreams. But other weird things seem to happen at home these days. Things go twang, bump and

crash — not in the night, but in broad daylight.

My wife really thought a ghost was around when she heard her son's guitar playing softly to itself in an empty room... But her fears vanished when she found that one of our two tiny puppies had sneaked into the room and onto the bed... And had walked across the guitar lying there.

But while I was writing this, there was a loud crash and a tinkle of glass. Our little maid from the Northeast was on her knees cleaning the living-room floor at the time, and my wife and I were sitting outside on the verandah.

It proved to be a pane of frosted glass high up above the living-room window, in which there was now a gaping hole. A few small pieces of glass were found on the floor inside, but the largest piece was in the driveway OUTSIDE... We never did sort out that particularly mystery, but my own theory is that it was a minor earth tremor in Outer Mongolia...

Now here's a Thai joke which involves a play on ENGLISH words.

A Thai doctor educated in the United States came back to Thailand and went to practise herbal medicine in a rural area upcountry. Thai herbal medicine often consists of little pellets, which must usually be taken together with some other substance such as honey.

A country fellow went to see this doctor for some ailment or other, and was duly given some pellets as a cure; but he forgot to ask the doctor what substance they should be taken with, and apparently the doctor also forgot to tell him.

Later he went back to ask the doctor what he should take with the pellets. The doctor, however, was now busy with another patient and shouted "Keep quiet!" Having been educated in the States, the doctor naturally shouted this in English; but he did it in the Thai fashion, leaving off the final consonants of both words, so that it sounded like "Kee kwai!" Now as any Thai will tell you, this sounds exactly the same as the Thai for "buffalo dung" — and this was what the unfortunate man thought the doctor meant. He went away scratching his head, muttering to himself, "Well, if 'khun mor' (the doctor) says so, I suppose I'll have to try it; but I must say it's not very pleasant!"

## **Wat Pomaen — Thailand's biggest Chinese Buddhist temple**

Tucked away in a part of Bangkok seldom visited by foreigners is a magnificent Buddhist temple that looks more like a Chinese imperial palace.

And indeed it is Chinese. Its name is Wat Pomaen, and it lies in a side road, Soi Sawang Arom, about half a mile away from Sathupradit Road, which leads down to the wide bend in the river south of the city. (You can find Sathupradit Road marked on most maps of Bangkok). As you drive down Sathupradit Road, you can see the curved roof and pinnacles of the temple's main chapel jutting up above the treetops to your left, just before you turn into the rather bumpy soi.

Wat Pomaen (its name means "Temple of the Heavenly Bo-tree") is Thailand's biggest and most lavishly decorated Chinese temple, and is recognised as one of the finest in Southeast Asia. Although comparatively new, it has an interesting history interwoven with that of the Chinese people in Thailand as a whole, and with the even older history of the evolution of Buddhism itself.

The Buddhist Doctrine early on became divided into two major branches — the Theravada, or Doctrine of the Elders, practised in India, Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos and Kampuchea, and the Mahayana, which developed in China, Tibet, Japan, Mongolia, Korea and Vietnam. This distinction is important in connection with the customs observed at Wat Pomaen, which being Chinese is a Mahayana temple.

Friendship between the Thai and the Chinese peoples dates back seven hundred years or more to the time of King Ramkhamhaeng the Great of Sukhothai, who sent an

embassy to the Chinese court. From then on, Chinese people became more and more integrated into Thai society, and many of them reached the ranks of the nobility. King Taksin of Thon Buri, who rallied the Thai nation after the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767, was himself of Chinese parentage; and it was in his reign that the first known Chinese Mahayana Buddhist monks came to Thailand.

After this the friendship between the two peoples became even stronger through a more intimate sharing of their religion; and during King Chulalongkorn's reign the first Chinese Buddhist temple was built in Thailand.

In 1925 a young Chinese named Po Cheng came to Thailand from his native Kwangtung (Canton) province, attracted by this country's reputation as a land where Buddhism flourished. He was ordained in a cave at the famous Wat Phra Puttabaht or Temple of the Buddha's Footprint in Saraburi Province and stayed there for about five years, devoting much time to meditation. Later he built many new Chinese temples in Thailand and restored all the old ones in various parts of the country. Eventually he became head of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism in Thailand — the seventh in line to hold that position.

However, owing to the constant coming and going of devout Buddhists to make merit in Bangkok's crowded Chinese temples, Phra Po Cheng found them too restless and noisy for meditation. So he decided to build a new temple in quieter surroundings. Thus the idea of Wat Pomaen was born, some 20 years ago.

The 12-rai plot of land near Sathupradit Road was acquired and construction began. It was to take 10 years and cost more than 27 million baht. Materials were specially imported, some of them from Italy and Czechoslovakia.

Wat Pomaen was officially opened by His Majesty the King in June 1970. His Majesty hoisted up the "cho-fah" or topmost pinnacle of the roof of the main chapel, which was crowned by a gilt "chat" or many-tiered state umbrella, fixed on top of a miniature Tibetan pagoda.

That Tibetan touch is typical of the architecture of the main chapel. Although predominantly Chinese, there are Thai and Tibetan overtones which blend smoothly into the

whole. The chapel towers above the rest of the temple, built around the polished marble courtyard in a symmetrical square pattern. The whole temple is as spotless and sparkling as when it was first built.

The large, intricate main gate through which one enters the temple is crowned with gracefully curving tiered roofs, like the main chapel itself. Inside the chapel, the main Buddha statue wears a robe covering both shoulders, unlike the Thai Buddha statues in which the robe covers only one shoulder. This symbolises China's colder climate, as do the saffron trousers worn by Wat Pomaen's monks beneath their robes — the normal wear for Buddhist monks in China. Beautiful mosaic murals on either side of the Buddha statue show scenes of 500 monks clad in this fashion, complete with trousers, gathering alms and listening to a discourse from the Lord Buddha.

The interior of the main chapel is indeed full of beautiful things — hundreds of small Buddha statues set in rows in the high, vaulted ceiling, in memory of the donors who helped to finance the temple's construction; delicate black-and-gilt panels on the insides of the main doors depicting different ways of showing mercy.

The splendour of the chapel is reflected in the halls and guest-rooms ranged along the galleries surrounding it; all of them are well worth a visit.

All the temple's 50-odd monks and 10 to 20 novices are Chinese. They follow the Mahayana custom of eating a strictly vegetarian diet, unlike Thai monks who eat meat. Another difference is the lack of a morning alms-round such as is the custom at most Thai temples; at Wat Pomaen, all food is brought to the temple by layfolk.

Apart from these few differences, the daily programme of the monks is much the same as that in any Thai temple. The monks get up at 3.30 a.m., and morning chanting from 4 to 5 a.m. is followed by a meditation period. Breakfast is at 6.30, personal chores from 7.30 to 8.30, then religious instruction until lunch, the last meal of the day, at 11. The afternoon is taken up with other personal chores such as robe-washing, cell cleaning and so on. Evening chanting is from 4 to 5 p.m., and more religious study from 7.30 to 9.30.

Visitors are welcome at Wat Pomaen, and the helpful monks will be glad to show you around. Take a Thai friend with you if you can (unless your spoken Thai is good!). But even if you can't, why not visit this friendly temple anyway, and see the great beauty wrought by Phra Po Cheng and Bangkok's Chinese Buddhist community, out of veneration for the Lord Buddha and his Teaching.

## Ban Bang Lee—the town in a hollow

One of the less well known curiosities within a comfortable day's outing from Bangkok by car is the small market town of Ban Bang Lee, the town in a hollow, in Suphan Buri Province. On the same day trip you can also see a beautiful old temple nearby and one or two other places of interest as well.

Take the Petchkasem Highway from Thon Buri to Nakhon Pathom and, when you reach the great copper-tiled pagoda, bear left round its south side to avoid the town. After turning north again and rejoining the highway, keep a careful lookout for Route 321 on your right, going north to Suphan Buri town. It's the first turning on the right after leaving Nakhon Pathom. As you turn into Route 321, make a note of the mileage reading on your speedometer (assuming it's working!)

Route 321 is well-surfaced and takes you through pleasant countryside with sugarcane plantations and an occasional orange-red flame tree by the roadside. About 45 kilometres (27 miles) north of Nakhon Pathom the road crosses a railway line. This is the key landmark to look out for; half a kilometre further on is a minor crossroads clearly signposted in English as well as Thai. The top line says "Suphan Buri", straight on, 61 km; the middle line is in Thai, while the bottom line says "Wat Phai Rong Wua" in English, 28 km to the right. Take this right turn and follow it for nine kilometres. It will bring you to the town of Ban Bang Lee, in the amphoe of Song Phi Nong.

The countryside is flat and open, and you'll see the town ahead of you well before you reach it. At first sight it looks ordinary enough, and you'll wonder why you've come all this way just to see another apparently typical Thai town. But — just before you enter this thriving little town of 10,000 or so



inhabitants, the road dips sharply down, and you'll realise the whole town lies in a hollow.

Even so, in the dry season it still looks like any other picturesque Thai town. But take a closer look at the big central market building, the rows of shops and houses flanking the marketplace and the main street at right-angles to it. Every building — market, shops, houses — is on two floors.

So...? The same could be said of every other Thai town, couldn't it?

Well — take an even closer look, at the upper floors this time. You'll see that many if not most of them are closed and shuttered. Those upper floors somehow look dead, unused — which is exactly what they are. For nine months of the year, in fact, life at Ban Bang Lee is lived at ground level.

But at the end of the rainy season — the “brimming-klong” season of Loy Krathong, from September until the end of December — the whole town lies under six feet of water, because of its position surrounded by higher ground. If you examine some of the piles carefully you can make out the high-water marks. During this annual flooding, the road from the outside world, along which you've just come, disappears suddenly into a lake at the point where it dips down. At this time of the year, Ban Bang Lee can only be reached by walking along raised planks — or by boat.

This is when those upper floors come into their own. Just before the annual floods, everybody and everything moves up one entire floor — shops, goods, market, homes, families, livestock. The town becomes something like a miniature Venice. Boats pass under plank bridges linking groups of shops and houses; and from the boats, or walking along the planks, one can look down and see the under-water streets and ground-level storeys below...

...Well, yes, I know many of us have to put up with the same sort of thing in some of the sois off Sukhumvit Road in the wet season! But we don't normally need to become gondoliers, as it seems do the inhabitants of Ban Bang Lee.

So any time in the dry or hot seasons is alright to visit this interesting little town. And of course it would be even more interesting to see it in its “wet” state, which I've never done.

As soon as the floods have receded again, the whole town resumes life downstairs; streets are cleaned, piles scraped down, and life moves down to ground level.

When you've seen enough, drive back slowly along the same road by which you came. After about a mile, watch for a sign pointing left, again with "Wat Phai Rong Wua" in English, as well as "Pak Khlong Bang Sam". Turn left and follow the dirt road for about two kilometres until it makes a wide loop to the left and back. Immediately on your right are the ruins of Wat Don, a lovely old temple. Its site is a green and shady spot, and the most striking feature is a reclining Buddha statue about 50 yards long, with a benign tranquil expression. In the centre of the site is the carved stone tower called a "mondop" which is the main spire or chedi. Around it are four smaller chedis. There are also four carved figures, two of which are "kinnarees", the lower halves of their bodies being those of birds while the upper parts are human. Their faces, too, have extraordinarily sweet expressions. The top halves of the other two figures are swans. The whole area, flanked by lush water-meadows, is a photographer's dream.

If you go back to Route 321 and continue north along it, you'll eventually reach U-Thong, where there's an interesting museum. Not very far away are Don Chedi, where a statue commemorates King Naresuan's victory over the Burmese, and a huge seated Buddha statue at Wat Pa Laylai just outside Suphan Buri town.

I hope you can make this trip. I'm sure you'll enjoy it.

## A Thai miscellany

Whenever my wife says something to me in Thai which I can't understand, the chances are ten to one I must immediately (a) ask her to repeat it; (b) ask her to try and explain it in her rather limited English; and — in all probability — (c) rush for the nearest piece of paper and quickly jot it down.

It usually turns out illegible, as this seems to happen when I'm in the middle of shaving or just about to leave for the office.

These precious scraps of paper are kept in a file on which is scrawled "Thai Ways — future articles." What is written on them has more often than not already found its way into print...

But going through the file recently, I came across no less than 22 more such pieces of paper, including the back of an old greeting-card. The information comes not only from my wife, but also from friends and acquaintances. It's very varied and bitty — but all the pieces of paper have one thing in common: they are all very, indubitably, Thai.

So I'm going to give you these, for what they are worth. I'll try to bring some sort of order into them, but doubt very much whether I'll succeed.

First comes a torn-off strip of paper no more than an inch wide. I know, from something written on the other side, that it's been languishing inside the file for at least four years. It says tersely: "Library for all cremation books at Wat Boworn." Perhaps you can understand that, but in case not, I'd better explain. Readers who have been to a Thai cremation ceremony will probably know that everyone who attends such ceremonies is given a souvenir book. The subject of the book is always something the deceased person was particularly interested in; perhaps cookery, or

gardening, or in the case of a very devout person, the Buddhist scriptures.

Well, someone (I don't think it was my wife) once told me that a copy of every such cremation souvenir book is deposited and kept at a library at Wat Bowornnives, the Royal Temple on Phra Sumane Road. I can't even swear to the accuracy of this statement as I've never been to see for myself. But anyway, that's what the scrap of paper said...

The next bit of paper, probably just as old judging from its yellowed appearance, is about "Sahn Phra-Phum," which the dictionary gives as "the shrine of the household god" — that is, spirit houses, the tiny miniature temples on pillars within the grounds of many Thai houses, hotels, office buildings and so on. A little story on this scrap of paper was told to me by a Thai friend. She said that when she was seven years old she had hepatitis, and just at that time her parents were moving house. So they had to put a new spirit house in the compound of their new home, to make sure she would get better, which she did. (Not all houses have spirit houses in the compound, especially nowadays in Bangkok where among some people the belief is dying out).

Next come two Thai expressions written on the back of the aforementioned greeting-card: "Daed rom, lom dtok." "Daed" is sunshine, "rom" is an umbrella but literally means "shade"; "lom" is wind, and "dtok" is to fall. "Sunshine, shade, wind falls." So it means "the weather is cloudy and windy."

The next little note simply says "nam jai." The dictionary translates this as "sympathy, kindness or clemency," but something tells me that this expression carries overtones of Thai which are probably a bit too subtle to translate. However, not long ago I saw an example of what I think was true Thai "nam jai."

I was in a taxi waiting at the "mouth" of Soi Thonglor for the lights to turn green so we could proceed into Sukhumvit Road. ("Bpakh soi," "the mouth of the soi," is the Thai way of saying the entrance to a soi). A truck laden with fruit took the corner from Sukhumvit into Thonglor so fast that a whole basketful of rather pricy mangoes were scattered on the ground and rolled all over the road. The driver stopped the

truck, got out and started laboriously picking them up one by one — in what was really a very dangerous spot, for that's a pretty busy corner with a lot of traffic. But every single car, truck and bus driver who passed, immediately sized up the situation and slowed down, taking the greatest care to avoid not only the man, but all his valuable mangoes too...

Now for two pieces of paper dealing with husband-and-wife relationships.

First, the bad news. There is a term used if someone eats from a dish which is inside another dish, or from two spoons held together one inside the other (why on earth would anyone do that, I wonder), or if someone is smoking a cigarette which is burning along one side only. In such instances Thais say of that person, "panraya..." ("Your wife," if it's a man) or "samee..." ("Your husband," if it's a woman) "...ja nork jai" ("...will be unfaithful and leave you for someone else.")

Now for the good news. At least, I'll do my best to explain it. I've written "Thais believe..." and later on the same bit of paper, "Chinese v. important." Anyway the message goes on, "... believe that the stars of a wife and husband can help each other. Four years of 'Thaht Thong' — if either the wife or husband is born in one of the four 'Thaht Thong' years, he or she can help the spouse. Will tell me later..."

This refers to the years of the 12-year cycle. Each year has its own "element" or "Thaht", and if the "element" of one's birth-year is gold ("thong"), that's good, both for oneself and for one's spouse too. Therefore an unmarried man or girl in one of those years is said to be very popular with members of the opposite sex as a potential husband or wife. (If you really want to know whether you were born in one of those "gold-element" years, it isn't too difficult to find out from someone who knows the names and sequence of the years in the 12-year cycle).

Here's what is says on another piece of paper: "Although I've lived in this country for over 15 years, I still occasionally put my cultural foot in it. The other day an office colleague asked me, since I was going to a nearby shop to buy a wedding card, to get her a 'get-well' card for a friend of hers. 'In Thai or English?' I asked, and she said it didn't matter. At

the shop I asked if they had 'get-well' cards in Thai, and was told they had. I chose one and painfully read out in the Thai verses without fully taking in their meaning.

"When I gave it to my colleague at the office she glanced at the verses and said 'Oh-oh! This is for an elderly person, and my friend is younger than me!' I'd missed the significance of the poetic Thai word 'karawa' in the verse, meaning 'to pay one's respects', which is only used by a younger to an older person!"

Now here are two little anecdotes about monkeys told to me by a friend from the South of Thailand.

The first one is about the method used to capture a "ling gang" ("the pigtail monkey," says the dictionary, adding in its usual erudite manner, "*Macaca nemestrina*." Biologists please note). These are the species of monkeys which are trained to climb trees and pick coconuts for their human masters — although nowadays this is only done in Pattani province and on Koh Samui.

These monkeys are quite greedy. So those who want to catch and train them will drill a small hole in a coconut just large enough for the monkey to get its paw through. The coconut is filled with rice to lure the monkey. The would-be catchers scatter a lot of these baited coconuts around a particular area and wait.

Soon a monkey comes along, puts its hand into the hole, grabs the rice inside — and then can't get its fist out again because it is now larger than the hole. My friend says monkeys have been found transfixed in this way by four coconuts — one attached to each hand and one to each foot as well. But he tells me the monkeys caught in this way don't suffer any pain because the edges of the holes are rounded so as not to chafe the skin. The captured monkeys are well-trained and well looked after.

The other tail (sorry, tale) told me by my southern friend concerns seaside monkeys in general. Monkeys at the seaside are clever enough to recognise the holes in which sand-crabs have buried themselves. Being natural gourmets, they find these crabs very tasty, and have adopted a method of catching them which is ingenious in the extreme, if you'll pardon the pun.



They just sit on their, ahem, on the sand with their tails dangling in the crab-holes; The buried crab, observing this strange object, attaches itself to the monkey's tail; whereupon the monkey withdraws its tail smartly from the hole complete with crab, and voila! One Crab Thermidor for M'sieu!

Occasionally, however, says my friend, a larger-than-usual crab clamps its sharp pincers round the monkey's tail, causing the latter to let out a loud yell of pain. Even monkeys, it seems, can't win 'em all.

Let's see — here are two pieces of paper dealing with days of the week. Never cut a topknot on a Tuesday or a Saturday, says one bit of paper, because these days are "hard days," and Thais say it won't be just the topknot that's cut off, but the child's whole head!

The second bit of paper's a bit confusing. It says "Tuesday's a strong day. Thursday's also a strong day, and a good one — learning, etc. Monks bathe or sprinkle people with holy water on Tuesdays and Thursdays to get rid of bad luck. Thursday's a good day for planting, because Jupiter is connected with plants. Dton-mai metta mahaniyom (trees, loving-kindness, great popularity). Check again."

Well, I did try to check again with my wife, but all I could find out was that Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays are associated with personal charm. This has something to do with the variety of "wahn" plant called "saneh jan khao", "white charm of the moon." (See Chapter 5. I think she said this variety of "wahn" should actually be planted on one of those three days).

Let me just add a bit more about Thursday. Being Jupiter's Day, this is indeed connected with learning. The Thai name for Thursday is "wan pareuhat" or Jupiter's Day, "Pareuhat" also being the name of the planet Jupiter. It is actually spelt "Pareuhasbodi" in Thai characters, but the "bodi" is silent. However, the spelling indicates its Sanskrit origin, for the Sanskrit name for Jupiter is "Vrihaspati" — not too unlike "Jupiter" itself, in fact. I suspect the two forms of the name may have a common Indo-European origin.

Anyway, to get back to Thursday's connection with learning. This is why the "wai kru" ceremony of students



paying respect to their teachers is always held throughout Thailand on a Thursday. The date may vary from school to school, university to university — but a Thursday it must be.

And on another piece of paper it says “When one performs the ‘wai kru’ ceremony one is not only paying respect to an individual ‘kru’ but to the knowledge and to the earlier teachers who discovered and handed down that knowledge to the present teacher one is ‘waiing’ — just like the Buddhist Doctrine itself.”

Now for three little pieces of trivia from my wife, on three more scraps of paper. She says that in the old days Thai country folk refused to have their photograph taken, because they were afraid they themselves would disappear inside the camera — or else it would shorten their life. So they always ran away as fast as they could whenever anyone pointed a camera in their direction.

The second note reminds me that she talked, rather vaguely, about the first ice ever seen in Thailand (imported from Singapore. This was long before her time, of course, and she heard about it from her grandmother). It’s nothing, really — except that the first ice caused a considerable sensation here in this tropical country where snow and ice were unknown except from photographs and the earliest movies.

The third bit of paper is simply a note that my wife was riding in a car in Phra Khanong one day and spotted a sign which she thought said “rap tam por” (“fathers repaired”)! What it actually said was “rap tam dtor” — “water-pipes repaired.” Soon after that, she started wearing glasses...

Under the heading “untranslatable words” on another scrap of paper is the solitary entry “sorm kang.” Let’s see what the dictionary says about that. “SORM KANG: To ask a question in such a way as to impute some guilt to the hearer, as “How often do you beat your wife?”; to say something which presumes guilt on the part of the hearer, as ‘I know you did not enjoy telling lies’.” Yes — “sorm kang” is untranslatable, alright!

Another piece of paper says “‘long khaek’ — community farming in old times, and today upcountry.” The dictionary agrees; it says “to gather one’s neighbours to help at

harvest..."

Being an astrologer, my wife says that if someone looks fit and well (or "looks bright," as she expresses it in Thai), that person will have good luck. As a result, many of her relatives and friends have formed the habit, whenever they come to visit her, of asking, "Do I look well today?"

On the same subject (or to be more correct, on exactly the opposite subject), she has told me a Thai expression, "gai napahk." The dictionary gives this as "to put the hand across the forehead while lying down in deep contemplation or anxiety; to regret." My wife adds that there's also a mock variation of this expression, "ao dteen gai napahk," meaning "to feel very depressed indeed" — and I shouldn't wonder either, for it means literally "to put one's foot across the forehead!"

On another bit of paper is written a Thai proverb, "kai dee yang gap teh nam, teh ta" — "to sell well like throwing into the water, throwing into the harbour." Or in its more usual English form, "selling like hot cakes"!

Another saying is "jeeb bpahk jeep kor." "Jeeb" means "to pucker the lips," "bpahk" means "mouth" and "kor" means "throat." So this expression means "to talk prunes and prisms," which is rather old-fashioned English these days. According to the Oxford Dictionary, it means "a mincing way of speaking; see Dickens' 'Little Dorrit.'" Well — by all means see it, if you've got a copy; I'll take Oxford's word for it...

I've written often about the sacred white cord called "sai sin" which is used in most religious ceremonies to keep out evil spirits and protect everyone and everything inside it. Someone (I can't remember who it was) has added one more piece of information about this, which I didn't know before: When holding a "tam boon" or merit-making ceremony for a dead person, that part of the "sai sin" which passes round the "pahn" or pedestal on which rests the bowl containing the holy water, is formed into the letters spelling the dead person's name. (I hope I've got that right.)

Now here is something a student of mine told me several years ago.

In the Thai alphabet there are two vowels which represent the short sound “-ai” as in the English words “by” or “my”. One of these letters is very common; it’s called “mai-malai” and looks like this: ๑ The other is called “mai-muan” and looks like this: ๒ (“Muan” means to coil or curl, like the top of the letter.) It only occurs in 20 words in the entire Thai language, and every young schoolchild has to learn what those words are.

They are taught to do this by learning a long, picturesque but meaningless sentence which includes all the 20 words. Translated, it goes as follows: “An elder person finds new cloth, gives it to the daughter-in-law to use to put round her neck, she’s interested in wrapping it up in a parcel, she keeps it private and doesn’t show it to anyone; she wants to get into a sailing-boat to see clear water, fish and crabs; anything in the cupboard isn’t under the bed; mad, dumb, carrying lotus-fibre, can’t see clearly, comes near.”

This is followed by the instruction, which the children must also learn: “Learn by heart, don’t wander away, remember all the 20 ‘muans’ well.”

Fancy having to learn that lot. It makes “A is for Apple, so rosy and red...” seem child’s play. But as I said, every Thai schoolchild has to learn it so as to be able to spell correctly.

On the same sheet is written the memory-guide for the eight “middle-class” Thai consonants, which is translated as: “The chicken pecks the children, the children die on the edge of the klong-jar.” (One of the eight, “dor chada,” is missing because my student couldn’t remember the correct word in the sentence.)

To end with, here are some scribblings on the last piece of paper, about food.

It starts off with the word “grayasaht” and the note says that this consists of seven kinds. The dictionary says “rice, bean, sesame and sugar cooked into a sticky paste, usually eaten during the ‘saht’ festival;” and it gives “saht” as “a festival at the end of autumn.” My scribbled note also says these sweetmeats are given to monks on the full-moon day of the 10th lunar month.

The information on the sheet was written down in a car stuck in a traffic-jam, so it’s a bit disjointed, I’m afraid. It goes

on to say that "kanoon" is a jackfruit, and the word "noon" pronounced in the same way as in "kanoon" means "to support" or "to encourage." So jackfruit trees are often grown at the back of the house to "back up" or support not only the house itself but also its occupants.

"Foi tong," that popular golden-coloured sweetmeat, is said to bring good luck on account of its colour, while "kanom jeen" and "bamee," varieties of noodles, are believed — especially by Chinese — to bring long life, because they themselves are long!











*More Thai Ways*, a sequel to *Thai Ways*, is a collection of the latest and most memorable articles from the author's weekly column in *the Bangkok World*. Together they present the reader with a fascinating background to Thailand and the Thai way of life.

Denis Segaller, an Englishman born in London in 1915, first came to Thailand in 1965 and, like many another, grew so fond of it that he made it his permanent home. Nine years later, at the age of 59, he chose a new career — the successful documentary film maker became one of Thailand's best known writers in the English language. His column has appeared in *the Bangkok World* each week since 1975.

He is married to Laddawan and, to use his own words, "soon after and to my surprise, I suddenly became a Buddhist."

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The author, his wife Laddawan, and stepson Jiap, temporarily in the monkhood.

